

REVELATION IN THE THEOLOGY OF  
H. RICHARD NIEBUHR

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1967

A Dissertation Presented to the Faculty of  
the Graduate School of Yale University  
in Candidacy for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

## SUMMARY

This dissertation is an interpretation of H. Richard Niebuhr's theological writings. The sovereignty of God and the inescapable God-man relation provide the context within which revelation operates as a transforming power and an organizing principle. This is the basis for the organic unity of Niebuhr's work and the kind of systematic interpretation set forth in this essay.

The format of the first three chapters manifests the dialogical movement characteristic of Niebuhr's thought. Beginning with the context of revelation, the self is discussed in its social-temporal relations and in its absolute dependence. Niebuhr's theory of responsibility is examined as an instrument for self-understanding and guidance in the midst of complex relational interaction. Chapter i concludes with an analysis of faith. Faith in the gods, the objects of ultimate trust and loyalty, is treated as a variety of the self - social companion - cause triad in interpersonal relations. In view of this context in which the relational, responsible, faithful self seeks to establish its own identity and integrity of action, chapter ii turns to the meaning of revelation. An abstract definition of revelation emerges in the course of a discussion of relativism and the interconnections among reason, faith, and history in Niebuhr's thought. The two essential elements in revelation, "organizing principle" and "transforming power," are embodied in the double character of Jesus Christ who both illustrates and empowers universal responsibility. The concept "symbolic form" is used to explicate Jesus Christ's role in reinterpretation and transformation. From this discussion of revelation the focus shifts back to the context, now understood as the universal triad of faith. God, the "personal third" in this triad, is understood to be immanent as well as transcendent. The self is discussed in its movement from sin to salvation effected by the transforming power of revelation, and a Christian interpretation of war illustrates the use of revelation as an organizing principle in conjunction with Niebuhr's responsibility symbolism. A consideration of the church in its relation to God and the world concludes the third chapter and completes the systematic interpretation of Niebuhr's work.

In chapter iv Niebuhr's theology is discussed in dialogue with his critics. A wide range of issues is covered in an effort to clarify certain points in the systematic interpretation and highlight strengths and weaknesses in Niebuhr's position. His understanding of the self and God, his employment of symbolic form, and his objective relativism receive primary attention. The fifth chapter briefly summarizes the context and movement of Niebuhr's theology and suggests further development with respect to symbolic form and metaphysical analysis.



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## ABBREVIATIONS

A word is in order concerning the footnotes. The first reference to a book by Niebuhr appears in the customary form. Thereafter it is cited by appropriate initials. This procedure is also followed in the case of one secondary source, Faith and Ethics, edited by Paul Ramsey. A list of the abbreviations appears below. Full publication details are available at the point of first reference and in the bibliography.

|                                                         |            |
|---------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| <u>Christ and Culture</u> . . . . .                     | <u>CC</u>  |
| <u>Faith and Ethics</u> . . . . .                       | <u>FE</u>  |
| <u>The Kingdom of God in America</u> . . . . .          | <u>KGA</u> |
| <u>The Meaning of Revelation</u> . . . . .              | <u>MR</u>  |
| <u>The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry</u> . . . | <u>PC</u>  |
| <u>Radical Monotheism and Western Culture</u> . . . .   | <u>RM</u>  |
| <u>The Responsible Self</u> . . . . .                   | <u>RS</u>  |
| <u>The Social Sources of Denominationalism</u> . . . .  | <u>SS</u>  |



## INTRODUCTION

This essay is an interpretation of H. Richard Niebuhr's theological writings. Taking revelation as a focal point, I will show that Niebuhr's work constitutes a coherent and internally consistent theology. Such an enterprise is systematic in a way that Niebuhr's own writing is not. None of his individual books or essays sets forth his theology in full or in outline, nor does he intend his collected writings to do so.<sup>1</sup> Therefore the essay is an interpretive study and not simply an exposition of Niebuhr's theology. This is evident in the selection and organization of materials and in the weighting of certain themes. It is my contention, however, that the systematic interpretation advanced in this essay is true to Niebuhr's fundamental theological insights if not his manner of presentation.

It is important to make clear at the outset the sense in which I find Niebuhr's theology systematic and therefore amenable to the kind of interpretation undertaken in this essay. Niebuhr's work does not evidence the

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<sup>1</sup>See H. Richard Niebuhr, The Kingdom of God in America (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1937), pp. ix-x. This comment on The Social Sources of Denominationalism (New York: Henry Holt, 1929), is the only instance in which Niebuhr refers the reader to another of his own works. Hereafter these books are cited as KGA and SS.

operation of a systematic principle. No single intuition or feeling such as absolute dependence has been chosen as a starting point from which to develop an exposition of the Christian faith. No particular method such as the correlation of philosophical questions and theological answers has guided the examination and articulation of theological issues. While Niebuhr's theology is not systematic in this sense, neither is its coherence and consistency simply a matter of repetition. Images such as responsible selfhood and Son of God do appear again and again. External and internal history and the triad of faith are among those distinctions and structures which are referred to continually. Yet these recurrent images and themes are derivative. They emerge from a fundamental certainty which is the real source of coherence and consistency in Niebuhr's theological writings. This is the certainty that God is sovereign. All men live and move and have their being in God.<sup>2</sup> It is the nature of this relationship which Niebuhr's theology explores. The systematic interpretation set forth in this essay has its basis in the situation to which all of Niebuhr's writing directs our attention and from which all his significant themes derive their meaning and interconnection. That is the situation of man as he stands with all the universe in and before God.

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<sup>2</sup>Cf. H. Richard Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," Christian Century, LXXVII (1960), p. 248, and H. Richard Niebuhr, The Responsible Self (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 44. Hereafter the latter work is cited as RS.

No attempt has been made in this essay to trace the development of Niebuhr's thought. This is not meant to suggest that Niebuhr never changed his mind. Indeed, open-mindedness and exploration of new intellectual territory marked his entire teaching and writing career.<sup>3</sup> However in Niebuhr's own judgment, and one that is substantiated by the entire corpus of his writing, the fundamental certainty mentioned above and those convictions immediately associated with it are present throughout. The changes are in theological formulation.<sup>4</sup> Where it leads to clarification or illumination, I have made explicit use of these changes in the exposition of particular aspects of Niebuhr's theology.<sup>5</sup> In most cases, however, the development of his thought is such that the impact of reformulation on this study has been in the preparation rather than the presentation.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Listen Pope, "H. Richard Niebuhr: A Personal Appreciation," Faith and Ethics, ed. Paul Ramsey (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), pp. 3-8, and RS, pp. 1-2 (part of "Preface" by Richard R. Niebuhr). Hereafter the Faith and Ethics volume is cited as FE.

<sup>4</sup> See Niebuhr, Christian Century, LXXVII, p. 249.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, infra, pp. 84-87 where external and internal history are discussed in terms of the nature-cause distinction, and pp. 156-58, where Niebuhr's understanding of the church-world relation is discussed.

<sup>6</sup> For excellent treatments of the development of Niebuhr's thought and the historical influences which find expression in his theology see Hans W. Frei, "Niebuhr's Theological Background," FE, pp. 9-64, and L. A. Hoedemaker, Faith in Total Life (Groningen, Netherlands: Kleine, 1966), especially pp. 33-113.



Niebuhr's understanding of revelation orients a systematic interpretation which proceeds in answer to three basic questions. First, what is the context in which revelation takes place (chapter i)? Here I discuss the complex relational interaction which characterizes selfhood and calls into question self-identity and integrity of action. Against this background I ask about the meaning of revelation (chapter ii). This question is answered with an abstract definition of revelation and a discussion of Jesus Christ, the normative instance of revelation. The third query concerns the effect of revelation (chapter iii). Here the process of reconciliation is discussed in terms of God, the self, and the universal community.

A significant gain in viewing Niebuhr's theological writings as a systematic whole is increased understanding of the parts. This also enhances the possibilities for critical dialogue. Such dialogue provides the content for chapter iv and thereby serves as an initial test of adequacy for the systematic interpretation. In the fifth chapter I conclude the essay with a few summary comments and some brief suggestions for further development.



## CHAPTER I

### THE CONTEXT OF REVELATION

Our examination of the context of revelation begins with Niebuhr's analysis of the self. This order is dictated by Niebuhr's own theological method as well as the substance of his position. The self can serve as a starting point for discussions of natural phenomena, other selves, culture, and God because it exists in a vast network of relations in which all of these are involved. I will consider these relations in the first section of this chapter. How the self organizes and interprets its relations further defines the context of revelation and suggests one role revelation will play in that context. This is the subject of the second section. Finally I will deal with faith, the most significant dimension of the self's relations. The discussion of the meaning and forms of faith completes the description of the context of revelation. It discloses the bearing of faith on other aspects of Niebuhr's anthropology and points to a second task of revelation.

#### A. The Relational Self

Human existence, as Niebuhr sees it, is characterized by complex relational interaction. The human self is

a conscious and often unconscious participant in a multiplicity of relationships over which it has only partial control. We are "beings in the midst of a field of natural and social forces, acted upon and reacting, attracted and repelling."<sup>1</sup> Each of our acts is itself a reaction to and the precipitator of numerous succeeding reactions. Attempts to systematize the avenues of self-action and reaction begin by revealing even more complexity in our relations.

Nature, society, thought, and feeling bear on one another in and through selves who eat and sleep, trade and legislate, read and write, love and hate. We live in a world of happenings and becomings, of mutual influence and reciprocity among such apparently unrelated factors as papal power and mass starvation. This interactional complexity features continual movement and change, thereby confounding exhaustive analysis from any one perspective. Domestic fashion, foreign economy, human freedom, ecclesiastical organization, national politics--an action in one area is likely to set off simultaneous reactions in each of the others. Our world is a far cry from the serial simplicity of "the house that Jack built."

The complex relational interaction which characterizes the human situation raises problems of self-identity and meaning. How does the self organize its numerous relations and interpret the actions upon it which necessitate a response? How does the self guide its own participation

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<sup>1</sup>RS, p. 56.

in each of its various relationships so as to act with integrity throughout? Indeed, is it even legitimate to talk about a unified central self in the midst of all these relationships? Such are the questions Niebuhr seeks to answer in his analysis of human selfhood. The first step in this direction is the identification of three basic dimensions of our existence as interacting, relational selves. We are social, time-full, absolutely dependent beings, existing in relation to other selves, in relation to the past and the future, and in relation to the ultimate reality.

#### 1. The social self

The self is fundamentally social "in this sense that it is a being which not only knows itself in relation to other selves but exists as self only in that relation."<sup>2</sup> The profound significance of the social relation becomes apparent when we examine the reflexive character which distinguishes human selfhood. The self is able to become an object to itself. It can know and evaluate its actions, even its own thoughts, now and in the past. The self can prejudge its own anticipated behavior. Niebuhr grounds our capacity for this self-transcendence in our relations to other selves. The inner dialectic can only take place in the remembered, contemporary, or anticipated presence of at least one other.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 71.



The self can be both subject and object because it is a social being which knows itself through the mediation of another. One and the same self, rational and emotional, is subject and object as, to use a parable, it is one and the same eye which sees and is seen in a mirror.<sup>3</sup>

The other in whose presence the self can be reflexive must also be a knower and an evaluator. This is why a person existing only in I-It relations fails to exercise real self-hood. Such a person cannot know himself as the other knows him simply because the other does not know him. In I-Thou relations the self knows himself as known. This reflective relation which exists between I and Thou can also exist between the self and his community. The self can observe and evaluate himself by virtue of his relation to a group of fellow observers and evaluators.

Awareness of one's own identity and continuity of action can only emerge through repeated social encounters which display a degree of constancy. Patterns of interaction are established in an I-Thou relation. Only if the Thou acts upon and reacts to the I with some consistency can the I take the position of the Thou in self-knowledge and judgment. Patterns of constancy are also established among the members of the community in which both the I and the Thou participate. The community is a source of self-knowledge mediated through individual Thous. I-Thou relations take place in a social setting which has its own mode of interaction, its own ethos. The self-knowledge which derives

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<sup>3</sup>H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Ego-Alter Dialectic and the Conscience," Journal of Philosophy, XLII (1945), pp. 353-54.



from my relationship with a particular Thou is also influenced by my relation to him in the context of our common society. For this reason Niebuhr adds an I-You designation to Buber's I-Thou. "The social self is never a mere I-Thou self but an I-You self, responding to a Thou that is a member of an interacting community."<sup>4</sup>

Reflexive life is life lived in relation to social companions. The inner dialectic of human selfhood takes place through the mediation of persons who at once participate in and represent larger communities. The demands of conscience are not laws decreed by some generalized other nor are they delivered by isolated individuals. The judgment of our inner court arises out of our relation to other men who are themselves living in a network of relations with some continuity and meaning of its own. The "social companion" concept points to the reflexive self's simultaneous relation to other selves and to a community of selves. The social self is always a member of an I-Thou-You complex, which is to say, the self is always in the presence of social companions.

The social companions who mediate self-knowledge and self-evaluation may represent one's neighbors, or perhaps one's professional colleagues or fellow-citizens. The self's associations are manifold, and they do not simply progress in inclusiveness from family to mankind. We participate in a number of overlapping and often cross-purposing

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<sup>4</sup>RS, p. 78.

systems of interaction.

Thus far Niebuhr's analysis of the social self has moved our discussion to the level of interactional patterns mediated by social companions, but we have yet to locate the unity of a self who must operate in and organize many such patterns. A further step in this direction is the recognition of triadic form in the relations of the social self. Triadic form is clearly manifest in the I-Thou-You complex which is itself ingredient in other triads. Because the self is social, all its relational activity takes place in the presence of social companions. The self participates in numerous relations, each manifesting a triad formed by self, social companions, and the "other" of the particular relation in question.

One such triad is apparent in the self's relation to nature, or the world of impersonal events and agencies.<sup>5</sup> Though man is himself a natural being, his participation in the world of things or its is not simply "natural." As a social being man finds himself related to society in all his relations to nature. He cannot divorce his responses to natural phenomena from ever-present social companions. Neither can he isolate his interpersonal action from his natural relations. He is party to a triad which includes both nature and society.

The categories we use to understand natural events and the language we employ to communicate our experiences

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 79.

witness to the presence of social reason in our encounter with nature. Society affects self-nature relations through social mores which structure natural action and reaction. Sexual relations may be enriched or perverted by the influence of social companions. It is as difficult to abstract social activity from nature as it is to keep social influences out of natural relations. Human history relates instance after instance in which debilitating natural phenomena accompany popular social practice. Whether the self engages in love or in war, it does so in the presence of nature.

The self - social companion - nature triad illustrates two features present in social interaction. Communication between selves is always about some third object with which both selves are in communication.<sup>6</sup> The self-nature relation involves not only a self - social companion relation, but also a social companion - nature relation. A duologue between selves implies another duologue between each of those selves and the object under discussion. In a nature triad direct experience or knowledge are the mediums of communication.

A second and related feature of social interaction is the self's partial but ever-present dependence on the social companion, the Thou and the You. In interpreting nature we are not completely dependent upon social reason.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 80. Niebuhr does note an exception, namely, "those rare forms of communication in which only I and Thou are involved, as in declarations of love and hate."



We can modify the inherited system of categories as a result of our direct experience of natural phenomena. Neither are we completely independent of social reason. We cannot face nature fresh, and even if we could, we would be at a loss to communicate what we see apart from our society's language. In a discussion of the conscience, Niebuhr puts this matter of partial dependence as follows: "Both those who maintain that the self is its own sole legislator and those who regard all such legislation as pure echo of social injunction seem to be mistaken. The authorship is a joint authorship."<sup>7</sup>

We must pause momentarily in our discussion of triadic form in order to emphasize what Niebuhr means by "joint authorship." The self is not only in society, society is in the self. We simply cannot escape the influence of social reason. No matter how thorough our denial of the structures and beliefs of our particular society, that denial itself must be couched in social language and bear sufficient continuity with social attitudes so as to be understood. There is a fate-like character about the society "in" the self. We are born into certain relations and others force themselves upon us. Our freedom of choice in social companions is limited. Yet alongside these "givens" there is the individual's own immediate experience, his own appropriation, modification, or rejection of his social companions' understanding. The limitations of social selfhood do not preclude the individual's own contribution to

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<sup>7</sup> Niebuhr, Journal of Philosophy, XLII, p. 356.

the joint authorship of self-knowledge and self-judgment.

The viewpoint which is imposed upon him by his birth at this point of history and under these particular conditions is not only a limitation but also an opportunity for discovery, not only a confinement to a relative insight but also an obligation to make the best of his insight.<sup>8</sup>

The inescapable influence of one's social milieu is clearly asserted in Niebuhr's discussions of culture, the total process and result of human activity.<sup>9</sup> Culture is social and social life is cultural. The purely private is no part of culture, and there is no purely natural or cultureless society. The human being who has his very selfhood in relation to social companions cannot avoid culture, his "secondary environment." Man as natural being becomes human in culture. He is in culture and culture has penetrated him.

Man not only speaks but thinks with the aid of the language of culture. Not only has the objective world about him been modified by human achievement; but the forms and attitudes of his mind which allow him to make sense out of the objective world have been given him by culture. He cannot dismiss the philosophy and science of his society as though they were external to him; they are in him - though in different forms from those in which they appear in the leaders of culture. He cannot rid himself of political beliefs and economic customs by rejecting the more or less external institutions; these customs and beliefs have taken up residence in his mind.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, "Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic," Preliminary paper for the Conference on Theological Education, Drew Theological Seminary, Madison, N.J., Nov. 29-Dec. 1, 1929 (New York: International Missionary Council Publication, 1929), p. 10.

<sup>9</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, Christ and Culture (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951), p. 32. See pp. 29-39 for Niebuhr's definition of culture and his consideration of seven of its chief characteristics. Hereafter this book is cited as CC.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

Returning to the matter of triadic form manifest in the self's relations, we recall that the third in the self-social companion - nature triad is impersonal. Self and social companion are related to one another and to nature, the world of non-reflective Its, by mutual knowledge. There is another triadic situation which is characterized not primarily by a noetic relation, but rather by commitment or loyalty. In this case the third is a cause.<sup>11</sup> By "cause" Niebuhr means an object or an objective to which one is devoted. It may be another person, an institution, a program or an ideal. Devotion to a cause relates the self to other devotees. In this triad the self and the social companion are loyal to one another by virtue of their loyalty to a common cause.

Causes are numerous and their fields of attraction are not always mutually exclusive. The result is further complexity for the self. Social-cultural man exists in a variety of groupings and structures. Competing claims operate within groups and between them. It would be quite enough to weigh the political claims of my nation upon myself and upon other nations. But this cannot be done in isolation from familial, vocational, and religious claims. I must be a father, teacher, churchman, and citizen all at once. Each of these roles is the personal focus of a network of relations among Thous. My social companions in one enterprise may appear as Its in the light of some other cause to which I am committed. The causes themselves are

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<sup>11</sup>RS, p. 83.



unstable. Their relevance and their ranking vary from situation to situation. In politics, for instance, personal, party, and economic allegiances bring together individuals who may otherwise never associate with one another. Post-election voting analyses reveal weird configurations of loyalty, configurations which are as likely as not to change before the next election.

The third reality which Niebuhr calls a cause displays a double character. It is personal and it contains a reference to something beyond itself.<sup>12</sup> The personal aspect is the same feature Niebuhr points to when he asserts that the demands of conscience are made by representative Thous, not by an abstract other or an isolated Thou. Something general is met in a particular. A cause is personal in a similar sense. The devotee or loyalist is "known" and "evaluated" by his cause. This self-knowledge and evaluation is mediated by social companions, remembered, present, and anticipated. As representatives of the national community, for example, founding fathers, war heroes, and statesmen particularize and personalize the demands and sanctions of patriotism.

Such individuals symbolize the nation as an object of loyalty, but they also point beyond that community to its cause. "They represent not the community only but what the community stands for."<sup>13</sup> This transcendent reference, the second feature of a cause, suggests a movement in the

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

realm of personal commitment. If the third in the self - social companion - cause triad points beyond itself to another cause, then a new triad is formed with a different constituency of social companions. If the patriot's representative figures appeal to liberty in calling for national allegiance, then the patriot may find himself joining forces with liberty-seeking patriots from other nations. This may separate him from some of his own fellow-citizens while uniting him with others. There will also be some different faces among the group of representative knowers who mediate the patriot's self-knowledge. The movement to the third beyond each third involves the self in a progression of judgments which gives it some independence from immediate relations. When the third in a cause triad no longer points beyond itself then the adherents to that cause constitute the final court of appeal in self-judgment. If the ultimate cause is the nation, then some of the self's relations with foreign nationalists may be called into question.

The triadic form of the self's relational interaction is grounded in the social nature of selfhood. Because the self is social, it cannot engage in isolated, one to one relationships. The entity to which the self is related in any given situation may dictate the number and variety of social companions, but it cannot eliminate them altogether. Because this "third" can be a natural object or a cause, there are the two kinds of triadic relation we have discussed. In one case the object is impersonal and thing-like,

perhaps the occasion for but not a participant in self-reflective dialogue. In the other triad the third is personal and dynamic, attracting and repelling the self. This way of putting the matter is somewhat misleading since the same third can be a "natural" object in one set of relations and a cause in another. A brief discussion of science will serve to clarify this matter and illustrate other features of Niebuhr's nature-cause distinction.<sup>14</sup>

It is customary to cite science as exhibiting the relations Niebuhr would place in the self - social companion - nature triad. Scientists are related to one another through their mutual investigation of impersonal objects. The individual scientist depends upon his professional colleagues for much of the procedural and substantive information without which he cannot launch his particular investigation. His own work is a contribution to general scientific knowledge and subject to criticism within that context.

An object of scientific study functions as a non-reflective It, but it is not necessarily impersonal in itself. This makes the point that the third in a nature triad may be a cause in another context. Political scientists make impersonal studies of nations to which patriots are passionately committed. Physiological and psychological studies are made of human beings who are also loved ones.

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<sup>14</sup>See H. Richard Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism and Western Culture (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), pp. 78-89, 127-141 for detailed discussions of science. Hereafter this book is cited as RM.



Whether a triadic relation is of the nature or the cause variety is not determined solely by the third in question. As the examples imply, the interest or disposition of the related selves may be the determining factor.

In addition to providing an illustration of the nature triad, science also manifests the self - social companion - cause triad. Scientists are related by common commitments as well as by common knowledge. For instance, they may be dedicated to truth as the agreement between phenomena and propositions, and the agreement among propositions. It can also be argued that scientists are committed to an interpersonal kind of truth which is as careful to avoid deception as propositional truth is wary of error. In both cases the cause of truth is personal in that the individual scientist is aware that his work is known and evaluated. This self-knowledge and judgment is available to the scientist in his relations with his fellow-scientists. The continual self-criticism characteristic of the scientific method witnesses to the dedication among scientific colleagues to propositional truth. The uneasiness about secrecy imposed by national or commercial interests witnesses to the dedication to interpersonal truth. The scientist's truth cause also exhibits a transcendent character. Particulars are seen as parts of larger wholes. They represent limited "laws" and point beyond to more inclusive hypotheses.

We can see from this discussion of science that one entity can be the object in triads of both the nature and the cause variety and, furthermore, that the same selves and social companions may be mutually related to natural objects and to causes simultaneously. The scientific community is a community of knowledge and a community of commitment. Niebuhr's distinction between the two kinds of triadic relation is best stated in terms of the character of the total relationship, and neither kind of triad can be ignored. The self is always related to thing-like objects and to personal causes. The self always stands in the natural world and in a society of selves with all its claims and allegiances.

Self, Thou, and You are the basic factors in the social dimension of human existence. Self and social companions join with other entities to form relationships which are characterized by impersonal knowledge and personal commitment. It is too early in our discussion to see precisely how Niebuhr relates the nature and cause triads. At this point it is sufficient to recognize that Niebuhr's analysis of social selfhood gives us a formal scheme whereby we can discover patterns or systems of interaction in the manifold relationships of a self which is always related to other selves.

## 2. The time-full self

Social selves are related to one another in time. Time-fullness is the second basic dimension of human

existence in terms of which Niebuhr analyzes the self's complex relational interaction.

The self and the now belong together. The self is the focus for time present, and the most vivid instances of self-awareness are in the here and now. This is not to say that the present can be isolated from the past and the future. Indeed, our search for the locus of self-identity would come to a halt if the present were simply the no-longer and the not-yet. According to Niebuhr the past and the future are extensions of the present.<sup>15</sup> The still-present is our conscious or unconscious memory of persons or events we have been related to in the past. These relations are a determining factor in the present, limiting the scope and depth of our contemporary relations. The future is already-present in the anticipation of continued as well as new relations.

Niebuhr speaks of these relations in time as relations between the self and compresent others and events.<sup>16</sup> In order for the other to influence my relations it must be "present" still, now, or already. Self-awareness, however weak or strong, involves this compresence with the not-myself. This is to speak of the temporal dimension in conjunction with the social dimension, for compresence with the not-myself always involves the presence of social companions.

The nature of compresent others and the ways in which they are related determines the quality of self-

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<sup>15</sup>RS, p. 93.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 94.



awareness and the sensitivity to time. I am most conscious of my identity in this moment when I confront others that are striking in their newness or their dissimilarity to previous confrontations, especially if these others are particularly threatening or promising. Likewise, my past is a history of compresent others. Insofar as past encounters were significant, the others compresent then are compresent now, either in vivid memory or in repression. The past that is present must include that to which the self was related if it is to include the self at all. So too, if the future is to be present it must be in terms of the self's anticipated relations, the others with which it will be compresent. Also like the past, the future makes a difference in the present when the others or actions it includes are new or unfamiliar.

Time-fullness is a dimension of selfhood because the relational interaction of the social self is continuous. Memory and anticipation are acknowledgments that the relations in which the self is currently participating grew out of previous relations and will themselves develop into new relations. Were it not for the continuous interaction which the temporal dimension seeks to articulate, none of the systems or patterns of constancy which we discussed in the first section would ever emerge. Self-identity would be a meaningless notion. The joint authorship discussed above is also continuous. The self brings a social as well as a private past into the present. There is the inescapable

cultural equipment which the self uses or rejects in its reactions to present experience. This equipment bears the personal modifications and the emotional overtones which have arisen from its previous use or rejection by the self. The adequacy of the "secondary environment" and the individual's own way of operating in and with it influence the present scene from a future perspective as well as from previous experience. Both the self in society and the society in the self are continuous. Talk about the contributions of culture and the self to present experience is at the same time talk about the self in its continual relations and interactions with compresent others still, now, and already.

The time-full dimension of selfhood exhibits the same characteristics associated with the triadic form manifest in the relations of the social self. The self's relationships with compresent others which participate in its past, present, and future can be expressed in terms of the self - social companion - nature triad or the self - social companion - cause triad. In the former case the self looks upon people and events simply as observable phenomena serially related to other occurrences in an impersonal time span. In the latter case the entities in question have an enduring "presence" by virtue of the self's participation in some cause or movement in which they are also involved.

The self can be related to individual historical figures in two ways. To some citizens of the United States Abraham Lincoln is simply the sixteenth president, following James Buchanan and preceding Andrew Johnson. These people speak of Lincoln in terms of speeches and documents which were instrumental in effecting certain significant changes in the course of events, especially in the areas of states' rights and slavery. Others are related to Abraham Lincoln as a fellow-citizen and a representative figure for the causes of federal union and civil rights. Such people appeal to Lincoln in their criticism of present practices in these areas. He is a personal symbol of the nation and its allegiance to the cause of human dignity for all men. The number and character of the self's social companions and the quality of these relations in time will be influenced by the way in which the self is related to particular historical figures and events.

Events may be regarded from the outside by a non-participating observer; then they belong to the history of things. They may be apprehended from within, as items in the destiny of persons and communities; then they belong to a lifetime and must be interpreted in a context of persons with their resolutions and devotions.<sup>17</sup>

In terms of the nature triad men are fated to their particular histories. We all take our place in a series of events which can be located along a time line. Seen in this way relations in time are given. In terms of the cause triad selves have some freedom in the interpretation and

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<sup>17</sup>H. Richard Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1941), p. 63. Hereafter this book is cited as MR.



appropriation of their particular histories. We are related according to commitments and loyalties to causes which endure. All citizens of the United States are related to Lincoln as the sixteenth president. Some of them are related to him as a companion in the cause of racial justice. Because they are, Lincoln is still-present.

The social self's relations in the present extend into the past and the future. In this sense time is a condition of self-identity and self-understanding. The self is in time. But the character of the self's relations to its own particular "compresent others" influences the relevance and impact of the past and the future. In this sense time is conditioned by self-identity and self-understanding. Time is in the self. In one case time is a framework for the impersonal, non-reflective relationships of the nature triad. In the other case it is an ingredient in the personal self-reflexive relationships of the cause triad. One way Niebuhr articulates this distinction is in terms of external and internal history.

So in external history there is the time of the naive chronicler with his acceptance of dynastic dates, his reckonings of years since creation, his A.D.'s and B.C.'s; or this history may think of time in the sophisticated way of a culture philosophy. But all these time-conceptions have one thing in common - they are all quantitative; all these times are numbered. Such time is always serial. In the series, past events are gone and future happenings are not yet. In internal history, on the other hand, our time is our duration. What is past is not gone; it abides in us as our memory; what is future is not non-existent but present in us as our potentiality. Time here is organic or it is social, so that past and future associate with each other in the present. Time in our history is not another

dimension of the external space world in which we live, but a dimension of our life and of our community's being.<sup>18</sup>

In the second chapter I will take up the problem of history in greater detail. At this point it is sufficient to note that the external-internal distinction apparent in history is rooted in the nature-cause distinction manifest in the relations of the social self. As with the two kinds of triadic form, so with external and internal history, the self is a being which exists simultaneously in both sorts of relation.

### 3. The absolutely dependent self

There remains a third fundamental feature or dimension of human existence under which Niebuhr discusses the relations of the self. When the self asks why it is at all, and furthermore, why it is here and now, it becomes aware of its absolute dependence, its complete contingency. The inexplicable presence of an individual self confronts that self with a radical action, that is to say, an action which it cannot identify with any of the relations or systems of interaction which we have already discussed.<sup>19</sup>

The self exists in relation to nature. It is immediately aware of its own body. But the self cannot deduce its existence from this bodily awareness because the self is already posited in the awareness. It is precisely the self-reference which makes a body mine rather than just another

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., pp. 68-69.

<sup>19</sup> RS, pp. 109-11.

impersonal living process. Science has enriched the self's understanding of natural forces in and upon the body, and the possibilities for harmonious participation in physical processes have greatly increased. But the explanation of biological events does not account for the fact that these events are taking place in and with me.

The question why I am I remains unanswered when the self considers its thinking mind. Again there can be no "therefore I am" because the primitive I was an original constituent of the thought itself. Nor are the achievements of psychology and sociology any help. Though the self may be able to identify the sources and understand the development of the mental categories it uses, why its own particular existence has been matched with their use remains a mystery.

The inescapability of society and time also raises but fails to answer the question of the self's inexplicable presence in the here and now. We have already noted the fatefulness of social existence in our discussion of cultural limitation. The subjective side of experience is at best a matter of joint authorship. It is true that self-knowledge and self-evaluation arise in the presence of other selves, but why these particular selves? The notion of "compresence" may be helpful in articulating the self's relations in time, but it does not tell us why we have been fated to compresence with precisely these others and events.

The radical action by which I am and by which I am present with this body, this mind, this emotional equipment, this religion, is not identifiable with any of the



finite actions that constitute the particular elements in physical, mental, personal existence.<sup>20</sup>

The self thus confronted with the mystery of its very being and its existence in a specific social-temporal context of relations with other existents is made aware of its most primitive relation. This relation is with "the creative and destructive power, whence all things come and to which they all must return."<sup>21</sup> The self that asks why I am I realizes that it is powerless to live and perhaps even powerless to die. If I decide to commit suicide, is that decision finally made in independence? And even if it is, can I be certain that suicide is complete and permanent self-destruction? The self that asks why I am I realizes that its beginning, being, and end are finally beyond its control. This realization raises the question of life's meaning, the question which confronts man when he reaches the limits of the social-temporal context in which he lives.

The social self's relation to the source and sustenance of its being, like its relation to any "other," is but one leg of a triadic relationship which involves social companions. In this case the "third," the source and sustainer of the self, appears to be the beginning and end of all being, the final reality before which all things pass. Thus recognizing its relation to this "other," the self recognizes a common relation with all others. All existents

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>21</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, "Life Is Worth Living," Intercollegian and Far Horizons, LVII (1939), p. 22.

are members of this triad and so the extent of the self's social companions in this relationship is universal. As with other instances of triadic form, there are two kinds of relationship. The self may be related to the final inscrutable power as an impersonal thing, indifferent to the beings it creates and destroys. Life may seem quite meaningless in terms of such a triad. The self may also be related to the ultimate other as a personal force which is not indifferent to the state of its creation. Whether its concern is best characterized as death-dealing or gracious, whether the last reality is a demon or a god, is quite another matter. In either case, as personal it is reflective, and it influences the self's relations with its social companions. As the object of the self's most fundamental relation an interested source of being either threatens or encourages relations among all the self's social companions.

Having concluded a survey of the relations of the self, it is clear that the social relation, the self-Thou-You complex, is inescapable. To speak of selfhood is to speak of the continual presence of social companions. This social selfhood is the basis for the triadic form exhibited in all of the self's relations. The character of the relationship among self, social companions, and compresent others influences the meaning and significance of time. We seem not to be related to time so much as to one another in time. When the "third" in question is the ultimate whence and

whither of the self's being here and now, the self is related to all beings in an eternal context. The implications of this most primitive relation for self-identity and understanding remain to be seen. Nor has it been determined whether the "third" in this relationship is thing-like or personal, whether it is the object in a nature triad or a cause triad, or perhaps both.

### B. The Responsible Self

Faced with the problem of identifying and orienting the self in the midst of continual, multi-relational interaction, we turn to Niebuhr's responsibility theory. Our task in this section is twofold. We must try to understand the theory itself, and we must determine how far it goes in helping the self apprehend and shape its relations.

#### 1. Responsibility theory

The use of responsibility as an interpretive tool for self-understanding and guidance is based on synecdochic analogy, the employment of a special experience in the analysis of all experience. We seek a pattern in the whole and in its segments analogous to a pattern notably manifest in one particular segment. The basic image for the theory of responsibility is that of man-the-answerer. It is taken from the special experience of men responding to one another in dialogue. Niebuhr prefers this imagery to that of man-the-maker employed in teleological theories and man-the-citizen employed in deontological theories. These traditional approaches leave out important aspects of our moral



experience. Niebuhr finds the symbolism of responsibility more adequate to the complex relational interaction which characterizes human existence.<sup>22</sup>

Niebuhr's choice of an interpretive tool grows out of experience itself. Responsibility theory is a report of experience before it is an instrument of analysis. Its analytical adequacy depends upon its truthfulness as a reflection. Responsibility theory can only make our relational activity intelligible insofar as it is a generalization from phenomena which pervade our actual existence as selves. Though there is certainly a reciprocity between theory and practice such that the former can alter the latter, Niebuhr does not present his responsibility theory as a mandate for change. Rather he seeks "to bring greater clarity to the self in its agency, not by supplying a theory on which practice may follow, but by illuminating the theory that is actually though unacknowledgedly present in practice."<sup>23</sup>

Responsibility theory seeks to give a formal description of the manner in which selves and communities actually, though often unconsciously, arrive at the appropriate or fitting action in the midst of complex, relational activity.

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<sup>22</sup>See RS, pp. 47-56, 69-71, 90-92, 127-135 for Niebuhr's critique of the traditional theories. Responsibility theory is dealt with throughout RS. See pp. 61-65 for the most concentrated definition. A discussion of the relative merits of various images bypasses the more fundamental question whether man does indeed use such images for understanding and guidance. I will attend to Niebuhr's view of this matter in the second chapter.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 135.

It is characterized by the question "What is going on?" The idea of responsibility abstractly defined is "the idea of an agent's action as response to an action upon him in accordance with his interpretation of the latter action and with his expectation of response to his response; and all of this is in a continuing community of agents."<sup>24</sup>

Responsibility theory involves four fairly distinct elements. The first two elements are response and interpretation. "All life has the character of responsibility."<sup>25</sup> However, only acts that are responsive to interpreted action are acts of the self. Heartbeats and knee jerks do not qualify as self-action. This does not mean that interpretation is wholly the work of the conscious, rational mind. Our responses to certain actions often follow interpretations that are influenced by hidden feelings and intuitions. Niebuhr's point is simply that self-action, action which is responsive to interpreted action, involves the distinctively human awareness that is "more or less that of an intelligence which identifies, compares, analyzes, and relates events so that they come to us not as brute actions, but as understood and as having meaning."<sup>26</sup> Interpretation, as it functions in responsibility theory, is usually a matter of relating particulars in larger wholes. A single event may be quite meaningless until it is seen in a context which has a meaning of its own. The first two elements in Niebuhr's theory make the point that, whether we consciously realize it or

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

not, our activity is responsive to particular acts upon us which we relate to other acts and events according to patterns of interpretation. Obviously, the meaning we "give" to an action will vary according to the context in which we place it. Our response to an action is a function of our interpretation of that action as well as the action itself.

Response, coupled with interpretation, reflects the determinateness and the freedom of corporate and personal human existence. The most powerful of nations cannot prevent strife in foreign countries. But any nation can respond to such strife in a variety of ways depending upon its interpretation of the events in question. Is the conflict of little or no consequence with respect to national security, or is it part of a conspiracy to gain international dominion? Is it a civil war or an act of aggression? Is the struggle likely to engage other nations, or is it more apt to run its course within its current bounds? The answers to these questions and the responses they entail depend on an interpretation which places the foreign strife in a world-wide context viewed from a number of perspectives. Often interpretation in international affairs involves placing a particular act of a foreign power in the context of its other acts, past, present, and anticipated. This accounts for the prestigious though often controversial position of "Kremlinologists" and "China watchers" in the United States.



The union of response and interpretation is not restricted to group relations. A child's response to a parental demand, a lover's response to the gesture of a loved one, a psychiatrist's response to his client's confession--each involves the respondent's own interpretation of the meaning of the demand, or the gesture, or the confession. Self-action is never response to completely isolated individual acts. Rather it is response within a meaning complex involving the respondent's own understanding of a number of acts, a context or whole in which the precipitating act is seen to be a component. The understood meaning of the context in which an individual act is placed may be more determinative for the response than the act itself. A child will comply with a parental demand he cannot understand if he associates it with other demands which he has found on the whole to be characterized by genuine concern for his own well-being. A loved one's gesture, apparently insignificant to an observer, may evoke a profound response from the lover who interprets it in light of the total love relationship. A seemingly sincere confession may carry little weight with a psychiatrist who hears it against the background noise of countless false disclosures.

Accountability, the third element in responsibility theory, calls attention to the forward-looking character of responsible or fitting action. Since the relational interaction in which the self participates is continual,

interpretation must involve or lead to anticipation. Man-the-answerer expects a reply, a reaction to his own reaction. The fitting act takes its place in a context that extends into the future as well as the past. It "fits" into a total conversation with a meaning of its own. The obedient child may be as aware of the expected parental reaction to disobedience as he is of parental concern for his well-being. The lover looks forward to the joy or sorrow his response will cause the loved one. The psychiatrist anticipates the effect his response will have on the client and on the relationship that has been painstakingly developed.

Accountability introduces evaluation into our discussion of responsibility theory. Given our anticipation of reactions to our response, some responses seem more fitting than others. The appropriateness of a response depends upon the continuing dialogue of which it is a part. But this raises the prior question of the self's interpretation of the situation. In what context is the self trying to make the fitting response? Also dependent on this question is the identity of the judge or jury before whom the self takes responsibility for its response. The elements of interpretation and accountability represent distinct but inseparable aspects of responsible self-action. Our interpretation of action upon us determines the context in which we see ourselves accountable and thus also the criteria of "fittingness" whereby our response is evaluated, both by ourselves and others.

Does the child see his obedience to parental demands simply in terms of his family, or are the child's peer-relations part of the context in which he anticipates reaction? Does the lover look forward to the social evaluations of his response, or does he see his loved one to the exclusion of all others? Does the psychiatrist respond as party to a single dialogue, or as participant in a context which invokes professional, civic, and family evaluations as well?

The temporal extension of personal interaction which raises the question of accountability is matched by an extension in being which raises the question of social solidarity. This fourth and final element in Niebuhr's responsibility theory refers to the continuity in the agency of selves and communities which is the basis of "responsible" rather than merely "responsive" action. Interpretation and accountability would be meaningless were there no continuity of interaction to which one could appeal. Again there is an interdependence of motifs in responsibility theory. The scope of social solidarity which is seen to be relevant depends upon interpretation. The patterns of continuity which underlie a determination of accountability correspond to the context in which the self understands its response.

If Niebuhr's responsibility theory is a true report of experience, then the elements of response, interpretation, accountability, and social solidarity represent phenomena which would be disclosed in any sensitive examination of



human activity. Regardless of the terminology, Niebuhr is asserting that it is the case that self-action is responsive to interpreted action. Furthermore, it is the case that responsive action becomes "responsible" when it takes account of the continuation of response-reaction dialogue in time and the continuity of human agency in being.

As an abstraction from particulars, responsibility theory does not tell us what to do. It only tells us that whatever responsible self-action we pursue will involve, consciously or unconsciously, questions as to whom or to what we are responding and in what context this response-reaction is taking place. What is going on, and what is the fitting response? Knowledge of the formal framework of self-action goes part way toward answering the questions of self-understanding and guidance which opened our discussion of selfhood. If we are to proceed further, Niebuhr's theory of responsibility must also serve as an instrument of analysis.

## 2. Response analysis

It is the purpose of this section to see how the theory of responsibility operates as an instrument of analysis. Throughout the discussion which follows, two general questions are appropriate. Used as an instrument of analysis, how does responsibility theory aid the self in apprehending his situation, and how does it guide his efforts to act with integrity? In other words, does response analysis provide a tool for self-understanding and self-determination?

The question "What is going on?" tends to heighten the self's sensitivity to all the relations and dimensions of its experience. Furthermore, it makes the self aware that whatever action it takes is taken in response. These two factors can be combined in the question, "What am I responding to in this situation?" Parental reaction to a rebellious child may be misguided if it is dictated solely by the awareness of a breach in discipline. Response analysis can lead to the discovery of other important factors such as a threatening school situation, a deep antagonism among siblings, or perhaps a physiological or psychological disorder that has been hidden. Taking an example from the corporate level, response analysis can increase the possibilities for effective social legislation. To what is a particular civil rights bill a response? Is it drafted in reaction to injustice in the distribution of economic wealth and political power, or the inadequacy of educational opportunities? Does it emerge out of guilt over previous discriminatory practices, or in response to the despairing cry of a neighbor? Or is it responsive to international criticism which threatens national prestige?

In addition to pointing out the responsive character of self-action and the plurality of forces which precipitate that action, the question "What is going on?" makes the self aware of the "social" nature of the situation in which it acts. As we have seen, the self cannot abstract from its society or culture even in response to the impersonal events

of nature. What is happening is never happening to it alone. The self must be sensitive to the influence of the social environment from which it has emerged and in the company of which it now responds. Sensitivity to the changing number and character of one's social companions from one situation to the next may also provide the self with a clue to its own unity. Whether the self is responding to an It or a cause, it is responding as a social self in a triad that always includes social companions who mediate self-knowledge and self-judgment.

As the question "What is going on?" makes the self sensitive to the rich plurality of any situation, it also brings an awareness of the givenness of that situation. Though the element of response in Niebuhr's theory is not simply a passive feature, it does emphasize the limitations of human existence. It calls our attention to all those others and events over whose compresence we have no control. It reminds us that some parties to our joint authorship are uninvited.

Response analysis can have two deleterious consequences which tend to suffocate human freedom. The disclosure of the "given" character of a situation may lead to personal capitulation in the face of fate. The self is tempted to merely "follow the bouncing ball." On the other hand, heightened sensitivity to the complexity of human existence may paralyze the self. Though unwilling to give up its freedom the self may fail to act in the absence of



an unambiguous option. In one case the self sees no room for its own initiative. In the other instance the self is disabled in its attempt to utilize the capacity for self-determination.

These consequences point up the crucial importance of the second element of Niebuhr's theory. Response is always coupled with interpretation. If the former tends to emphasize the givenness of human existence, the latter suggests the element of freedom. Interpretation represents the subjective side of the question "What is going on?" Here the host of forces impinging upon the self are organized for meaning. Here the sensitive self relates its data and puts individual factors into larger contexts. How this is done bears heavily on the action that follows.

The meaning of the child's rebellion is one thing if only the child, his parent, and a broken rule are taken into consideration. The meaning may be quite different if the child's peers, teachers, siblings, and physiological-psychological development are considered. How the parent relates all these factors will determine his action. The extension of the scene he surveys and the manner in which he organizes the components of that scene are points at which he exercises freedom in determining what responsive action to take. Even if he decides not to act at all in the face of complexity he is making an interpretation. He understands the situation between himself and his rebellious child as hopeless so far as any specific measures

on his own part are concerned. His abdication is a free act.

The character of freedom which interpretation brings to self-action is not limited to those cases in which the respondent can alter the external circumstances. Take, for instance, the variety of responses to natural phenomena such as earthquakes, congenital assets and liabilities, or even a rain-spoiled picnic. The most striking examples pertain to human suffering. The personal character of the helpless respondent develops in accordance with his interpretation of the action which precipitated or continues his predicament.

The process of relating persons and events with one another in larger contexts that have a meaning of their own is not arbitrary. The social self is always making its interpretations in the presence of social companions, remembered, contemporary, or anticipated, and if society is in the self, there is no such thing as a completely independent interpretation. Nonetheless, there are usually significant interpretive options which allow some degree of individual freedom. Inherited categories and patterns of interpretation can themselves be modified. Reinterpretation, the reorganization of material into new meaning complexes, has been practiced with dramatic results by historians and psychotherapists, among others. The reinterpretation of anticipated as well as past events often alters our response to present happenings.

The element of interpretation in response analysis also allows for consideration of the good and the right. Our understanding of a friend's goals and ideals will influence our response to the favors he asks and the commitments he makes. Our nation's response to a foreign power's treaty proposals will involve judgments as to that power's respect for human justice and international law. One of the merits of asking what is going on rather than what is the good or what is right in a particular situation is precisely this sensitivity to the value scales and notions of duty held by other parties to whom we are related. The inclusive nature of response analysis seeks to avoid self-centered assessments of a situation. It tries to preclude exclusive homage to an ideal or a law in circumstances where there are goods to be served as well as duties to be met. "For the ethics of responsibility the fitting action, the one that fits into a total interaction as response and as anticipation of further response, is alone conducive to the good and alone is right."<sup>27</sup>

In our discussion of responsibility theory we saw that the four elements or motifs are interrelated. Though there is a sense in which accountability and social solidarity are simply functions of interpretation, there is also a sense in which accountability raises questions of interpretation and social solidarity. It is another way of asking, "To whom or to what am I responding?" This is especially

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.



apparent when responsibility theory is employed as an instrument of analysis. The self's anticipation of reactions to its own response includes evaluation. Accountability involves the question, "To whom or to what do I appeal to sanction my response?" "Who will judge the reactions precipitated by my response?" The answer to these questions defines the realm in which accountability is a consideration. What the self is responsible for depends on whom or what the self is responsible to. In order to anticipate the consequences of self-action responsibly, the self asks what patterns of meaning and networks of interactional continuity are relevant. In practice accountability entails more than anticipation. In raising questions of judgment and evaluation it suggests the possibility of responsible rather than merely responsive action. It can issue in a definition of the interpretive context and the extent of recognizable social solidarity.

If the father of the rebellious child is only accountable to his wife, then it would seem that he is only accountable for members of his immediate family. In determining his response he need only consider reactions anticipated among the siblings. If he holds himself accountable to a larger community of neighbors or citizens, then he must take into account the reactions anticipated among the child's peers and their parents, and also the civil authorities. Long range considerations such as the child's development as a healthy, useful member of society become influential.

Accountability before mankind may involve a sensitivity to patterns of interpretation and networks of interpersonal relationships which dictates action of a sort quite contrary to the expectations of the immediate community. The point is that the focus of accountability can function so as to determine the factors which enter interpretation and set the boundaries within which the consequences of social solidarity are considered.

These examples indicate the need to distinguish between that to which the self is accountable and the persons who mediate self-knowledge and judgment. The parent's accountability before his society is mediated by neighbors, the child's teachers, and other representative Thous. The element of accountability in response analysis points to the cause triad in the social self's relations. In answering the question to whom or to what it is accountable, the self is related to social companions similarly accountable. Responsiveness becomes responsibility when the self recognizes its accountability before a reflective third and before a mediating jury of reflective Thous, social companions committed to the same cause.

The social companions which a self has in its commitment to a cause, in its accountability before a third, are not necessarily the same beings with which the self recognizes social solidarity. For instance, a politician may be committed to the national interest as a final cause. This commitment relates him to fellow-nationalists, social

companions who act as the jury in assessments of accountability. However, the politician must consider networks of interacting continuity which go far beyond these social companions if he is to protect national security and prosperity. The failure of isolationism as a "national" policy is one graphic example of this situation. The point to recognize for our purposes is the divisiveness that results when final causes are limited. Some elements of social solidarity must either be denied altogether or given partial or secondary treatment. This also prejudices interpretation. A meaning context which is oriented by national self-interest will provide a distorted view of other nations and their self-interest.

The divisiveness which shows up in interpretation and social solidarity when the self is accountable to a limited cause is the negative counterpart of the transcendent reference of thirds in cause triads. The movement to a third beyond each third is directed toward an inclusive interpretation of the full range of social solidarity. It is a movement in the direction of a universal cause which would integrate the action of all selves. Before such a cause the self would be accountable for all its responses. It would seek to anticipate the consequences on as wide a scale as possible. It would be responsible in a universal context of social solidarity.

As an instrument of analysis, responsibility theory does aid the self in its apprehension of particular situations.



As an adequate report of experience, responsibility theory raises questions which sensitize the self to the responsive, social character of human existence. It illumines the points at which free agency is possible, and it anticipates the consequences. Furthermore, the way in which accountability functions with the other elements in response analysis suggests a special significance for the self's "cause" relationships, its triads of commitment and loyalty.

But responsibility theory is finally an empty framework. Used as a guide in self-determination, it directs but it does not decide. While it calls attention to the move from responsiveness to responsibility, it does not tell the self to what it is responding or to whom it is accountable. It points out but does not erase the discrepancy between social companions and the full extent of social solidarity. It suggests that self-integrity might be found in relation to a cause which holds the self accountable in all its other relations, but it does not designate that cause. In order to apprehend and shape the moral life, response analysis must be employed in conjunction with an organizing principle.

The analysis of the responsible self like that of the relational self clarifies rather than answers the questions with which this chapter began. We have seen the importance of the social character of human selfhood and the triadic forms in which it is expressed. The cause triad has emerged as a significant factor in self-understanding and guidance as viewed in response analysis. Its

possibilities as a clue to self-integrity suggest a more detailed examination of personal relationships of commitment.

### C. The Faithful Self

The self - social companion - cause triad is the form taken by relationships of interpersonal commitment. Niebuhr's description of faith involves such a relationship. For the remainder of this chapter our attention will be focused on the meaning and structure of faith, the forms in which it is manifest, and the clues it provides for a better understanding of the relational, responsible self.

#### 1. The meaning and structure of faith

Niebuhr distinguishes between two sets of meanings for the word "faith." There are what he calls the Greek meanings, those employed in a quasi-cognitive sense, and the Hebrew meanings appropriate in an interpersonal context. In the former set faith is somewhat similar to and yet distinguishable from knowledge or sight. Niebuhr cites five such meanings.<sup>28</sup>

In the first instance, faith is the acceptance of an assertion about things with which one has an indirect relation. It is to believe that something is the case on the

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<sup>28</sup>H. Richard Niebuhr, "On the Nature of Faith," Religious Experience and Truth, ed. Sidney Hook (New York: New York University Press, 1961), pp. 94-98. My discussion of faith in the cognitive context is almost entirely dependent on this essay, Niebuhr's only extensive clarification of the non-interpersonal meaning of faith. His other remarks on the subject, however fleeting, are consistent with this analysis. Cf., for example, H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Triad of Faith," Andover Newton Bulletin, XLVII (1954), pp. 3-6, and RM, p. 16.

basis of another's testimony. We accept the testimony because we are confident in the witness's special expertness or because we yield to his more direct relation to the subject matter. An example of this phenomenon is our reliance upon scientific explanations of natural occurrences even in the face of personal experience which is apparently contradictory. Although I see the sun "rise" and "set," I believe that it is actually the case that the earth is moving around the sun. This meaning of faith as belief on the authority of others is to be distinguished from a second use which refers to subjective feelings of assurance. Quite often when faith is used alongside "opinion" and "knowledge," degree of assurance-feeling has been substituted for directness of relation. Such subjective states are difficult to define and measure.

The acceptance as first principles of unproved postulates such as scientific premises or religious dogma is a third phenomenon often called faith. The noteworthy characteristic here is not the authority of experts or a subjective assurance-feeling but the sort of validity such postulates possess. Rather than being the assured result of a process of reasoning, they are presupposed at the outset of such a process, and their only verification is the adequacy of the consequent interpretation. Such postulates usually go unquestioned by their adherents. They differ greatly in scope and in the degree of consciousness with which they are held. Belief in the intelligibility of



nature, the conviction that the course of human history is arbitrary, and faith in the principles of democracy are examples.

Niebuhr cites personal knowledge as a fourth meaning of faith in the cognitive or Greek sense. By this he means a direct apprehension or an assent that involves the whole person. Perhaps the best way to describe this phenomenon is to say that it encompasses more of the responsive capacities of the self than any of the other cases we have considered. The feeling of absolute dependence is an example of the direct and total involvement which characterizes this meaning of faith. The fifth and final reference of faith in the first set of meanings is to world views or theories of human history. So understood, the Christian faith is one of several grand schemes of self or community orientation.

Niebuhr does not argue that these five uses of faith appear in distinct purity. The point is that there are these motifs which occur in our use of the term faith, and each of them has its basis in identifiable phenomena of human experience. In addition to cognitive or Greek references, there are the Hebrew meanings more aptly described in an interpersonal context. Here faith means trust and loyalty. This understanding is the one with which Niebuhr himself is most concerned.

We may undertake to describe a fundamental personal attitude which, whether we call it faith or give it some other name, is apparently universal or general

enough to be widely recognized. This is the attitude and action of confidence in, and fidelity to, certain realities as the sources of value and the objects of loyalty.<sup>29</sup>

The two Hebrew meanings of faith are components of a single relation. Faith, as Niebuhr generally uses the term, is both trust and loyalty.

As trust, faith is confidence in or reliance upon a source and center of value. I trust my friend because he values me. I need not be wary of a betrayal or deception. But more than this, I have worth and so too do my actions because of my friend's evaluation. Insofar as I have such a friend my life is meaningful, my deeds have purpose.

The second element of faith is loyalty. It is characterized by commitment, devotion, and resolution. If I am a faithful friend, I am not only trusting but also trustworthy. In addition to avoiding betrayal and deception on my part, I seek ways of promoting my friend's well-being. I hold the center of value as an object to work for and perhaps even live and die for. If trust is taken as the passive element in faith, then loyalty is its active component.

The object of trust is most appropriately described in terms of value, while the object of loyalty suggests the language of cause. "Centers of value and causes may, however, be only two names for the same objective realities from which and for which selves live as valued and valuing beings."<sup>30</sup> There is a sense in which center of value and

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<sup>29</sup>RM, p. 16.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 22.

cause simply designate two facets of the same object of faith. This sense is apparent in the friendship example we have been using. My friend values me and my activity, and at the same time I see my friend and his best interests as a cause to be served.

There is another factor in the structure of the faith relationship. I can distinguish between my friend and our common cause. Perhaps this common cause is the friendship itself. There are times when we act so as to preserve a relationship that has meaning and value of its own. True friends are able to absorb the occasional unfriendly acts of their partners out of a trust in and loyalty to the friendship as well as the friend. As likely as not the common cause may be something other than the friendship itself, something which transcends the friendship. Such other causes may provide the initial basis for the friendship, and perhaps even its continuing sustenance. Causes such as political power, nationalism, and civil rights have made friends of many a strange pair.

The faith relationship is a variety of the self - social companion - cause triad. Trust and loyalty are in reciprocal relations,

. . . yet not in the simple reciprocity in which trust on the part of the self responds to the loyalty of the other to this self, but rather in that more complex pattern in which fidelity is related not to one term only but always to two; it is faithful to both the trusting self and to the common cause.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Niebuhr, Religious Experience and Truth, ed. Hook, p. 99.



Faith, the self's dual response of trust and loyalty, moves in two directions. Social companions are faithful to one another in their faithfulness to a common cause.

This structure of faith is apparent in science. The natural scientist and his colleagues are faithful to the common cause of knowledge or truth. They have confidence in the meaningfulness and intelligibility of natural phenomena, and they labor to discover the ways in which particulars participate in the universal. But the scientist also trusts in the truthfulness of his colleagues, and he is actively truthful to them. He values their appraisal of his work, and he seeks to make a meaningful contribution to their enterprise.

Nationalism is another illustration of the self - social companion - cause structure of the faith relationship. The nation is a source and center of value in which the citizen places his trust. It provides the context in which his life and vocation are meaningful. The nation evaluates the work of poet and painter as well as that of soldier and statesman. The citizen who has confidence in his nation as promoter and protector is also loyal to his benefactor. The nation is his cause. He commits his art to the nation's glory, his eloquence to the nation's honor, his military skill to the nation's defense. This confidence and loyalty is also directed to the citizen's social companions, his fellow-patriots. He will live and die not only for his country, but also for his countrymen. In this example the

common cause held among social companions may be the nation itself. However, this is not necessarily the case. The nation and its citizens generally appeal to some transcendent cause such as democracy or peace in the world or social justice. In any case, the faithful citizen responds in trust and loyalty to his fellow-citizens and to a common cause.

The structure of faith is triadic. It involves trust and loyalty on the part of self, social companion, and cause. Faith is a double movement from the self to social companions and to a cause.

I trust the companion in his loyalty to me, and in his loyalty to the cause to which I am also trying to be faithful. I expect his trust in me as one who will not only never let him down but as one who will not let down the cause and then I somehow try to trust the cause, that which transcends us both as that which will not let him down or deceive him and which will not deceive me or let me down. Here is at least a kind of triad of faith.<sup>32</sup>

The faith relationship is a triadic structure of the "cause" variety. When dealing with faith simply as a structure apparent throughout interpersonal relations there is little reason to distinguish it at all from the cause triad. Objects of faith display the same reflective and self-transcendent characteristics that typify causes. Indeed, objects of faith are causes. They are also value-centers, but this is not so much a difference as an elaboration of the reflective feature of causes, and the fact that commitment is only genuine when the cause is trusted. It is

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<sup>32</sup>Niebuhr, Andover Newton Bulletin, XLVII, p. 8.

difficult to imagine a cause that is not understood as good by its devotees.

The distinction between triads of faith and cause triads in general is the special significance of the former. Niebuhr is primarily interested in faith as it pertains to the question of life's meaning or worth. He is concerned with ultimate causes and value-centers. As a triadic structure of trust and loyalty faith is present in an unlimited variety of relations, but Niebuhr focuses on those faith triads which qualify all the rest. The faith triad which has the most profound significance for the self is the one which includes what is for that self the final cause and the ultimate community of social companions. Niebuhr's analysis of the forms taken by such faith triads illumines the problem of self-integrity and points in the direction of a solution.

## 2. The forms of faith

Faith as trust and loyalty is a universal phenomenon. Attacks on a particular faith merely manifest reliance on another value-center and allegiance to another cause. Niebuhr speaks of "the apparently universal human necessity of faith and of the inescapability of its gods, not as supernatural beings but as value-centers and objects of devotion."<sup>33</sup> Gods are the objective realities to which the subject activity of faith is directed.<sup>34</sup> Atheism is ruled out by definition since men cannot live without faith and the objective counterpart of faith is God or the gods.

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<sup>33</sup> RM, p. 23.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 12.



So it is that the forms of faith we are about to discuss are referred to as theisms.

There are three basic forms of faith: henotheism, polytheism, and radical monotheism.<sup>35</sup> These forms of faith are always in conflict with one another. No individual or community expresses one of the forms purely. The forms can be described abstractly in terms of Niebuhr's definition of faith, but they are actualized only insofar as they are embodied in concrete human existence. The forms of faith are manifest in all social enterprises.

Henotheism takes as its center of value and object of devotion some finite society. It is faith in one god among many, and therefore it is necessarily exclusive. Borrowing terminology from Bergson, Niebuhr identifies the object of this faith as a "closed society."<sup>36</sup> It can be one's family or nation, one's church or political party. Any social unit can qualify as a god of faith so long as it is a community from which the devotee can derive his value and to which he can commit his service. Nationalism manifests the henotheistic form of faith as clearly as it will be found anywhere. In such cases the survival and prosperity of the nation are the final tests of any activity on the part of the citizens. Industry, art, religion, and education stand under a national evaluation which is itself beyond question. National boundaries determine the definition of friend and foe. In nationalism, as in all examples of henotheism, something is left out. The horizon of the

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. 24-37.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

closed society is always less than universal.

Henotheism, to the extent that it is actually embodied, is characterized by a single god, a unity of value-center and cause and thus a unity of selfhood. In henotheistic nationalism the central self is citizen and the fundamental orientation of all self-action is citizenship. Whether or not such unification can actually be complete is not our present concern. The point is rather to strike a contrast between henotheism and a second form of faith, polytheism. The latter is characterized by multiple centers of value and a proliferation of causes. The consequence of this passing faith in many gods is an extreme lack of self-integrity. Polytheism sustains no single enduring community in which the self is assured of worth. The polytheistic self is an individual trying to satisfy whatever god he momentarily chooses. These gods are often the self's various peer groups or the different communities which are associated with each of the self's activities. Trying to prove worthy of all of them is a frantic enterprise.

The devotee of many gods passes from cause to cause as his interest surges and subsides. The despair following enthusiasm for some political program is overcome by a new excitement for one of the arts or a religious sect, but the new cause turns out to be another passing fancy. Usually the polytheist serves a number of limited causes at the same time. This makes the move to another form of faith all the more difficult, since no one object of loyalty can ever win

a pervasive commitment from the self. In polytheism self-hood is nothing more than a point of contact among a host of disparate activities and associations.

The third form of faith, radical monotheism, is faith in the One beyond the many. It is universal trust matched with universal loyalty. As its center of value, radical monotheism substitutes for the closed society of henotheism the principle of being itself. "Its reference is to no one reality among the many but to One beyond all the many, whence all the many derive their being, and by participation in which they exist."<sup>37</sup> In radical faith the principle of being and the principle of value are identical. The source and sustainer of being is relied on for the value of the self and all other existents. Since all being participates in the One that is the center of value, nothing "under the sun" is without worth. Whatever is is good.

By its trust in the universal principle of being, the radically faithful self is related to all beings in the universe. Its cause is at once the principle of being and the entire realm of being.

The principle of being has a cause, namely, the realm of being, so that loyalty to the principle of being must include loyalty to its cause; loyalty to the realm of being, on the other hand, implies keeping faith with the principle by virtue of which it is, and is one realm.<sup>38</sup>

The unity of the realm of being is due not only to the loyalty of one existent to the other, but to the transcendent loyalty of the creator and sustainer of all existents.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 33.



So it is that the universal loyalty of radical faith is directed toward each being and toward the universal community in which it participates. For the radical monotheist, one's neighbor is one's "companion in being."<sup>39</sup>

The three forms of faith are never purely embodied. They are always manifest in modifying conflict with one another. Some examples will underline this point and also serve to clarify the meaning of the forms.

Struggle among the forms of faith is apparent in the political community.<sup>40</sup> Our previous references to nationalism as a manifestation of henotheistic faith may suggest a political characterization that is too simple. Undoubtedly many nations have so blurred the distinction between themselves and their cause that a nationalistic social faith has been substituted for a henotheistic faith more broadly conceived. American national self-interest and the cause of "freedom-loving people everywhere" are often difficult to distinguish in practice regardless of the accompanying political rhetoric. Nonetheless, there is a continual thrust of monotheism which never lets the social faith of the political community rest.

It will not do, to be sure, to say that the American nation is intensely God-fearing in a monotheistic sense of God; there is too much evidence to the contrary. Yet God-fearingness, as reverence for the principle of all being and for its domain, is present among us and is in almost daily conflict or tension with our large and small social faiths.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., pp. 68-77.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

The presence of monotheism as well as henotheism in the American political community is exemplified in the double rootage of freedom of religion in our society. It is a derivative of that loyalty to national interests which demands that each religious group tolerate the others. The secondary character of religious loyalties is given expression in statements about worldly politics and heavenly salvation, and references to each man's private faith. But freedom of religion is also rooted in the universal loyalty that acknowledges the priority of God over the state. In this case religious freedom expresses man's awareness that he belongs to a universal commonwealth of being before he belongs to a national community. Whether we see freedom of religion historically rooted in national or universal loyalty, we must make a decision as to its proper context in our own time. The distribution of public funds to church-related educational institutions, and the government employment of clergy as military chaplains are but two instances which involve such a decision.

The possibility of interpreting political policies and doctrines in the context of either a national or a universal faith is not limited to the case of religious freedom. Is political power limited and balanced so that opposing parties cannot destroy the nation in their battles over policies and patronage? Or does such limitation recognize that ultimate power rests with the One beyond all the many and that the many must be curbed in their ambition lest they be destructive of themselves and their neighbors?

Is adherence to the law based on the recognition that regulation is necessary for the achievement of national peace and prosperity? Or does one reverence law and order because the very fabric of universal society consists of covenants between trusting and trustworthy partners?

Using the doctrine that all men are created equal, Niebuhr gives us another example of the struggle among the forms of faith in the political community.<sup>42</sup> As it stands the doctrine would seem to be monotheistic. It recognizes a common creative source of existence in relation to which all men have worth. It implies a commitment to the achievement of a state of affairs in which every man will have equal consideration in the fulfillment of his own well-being. Attacks on the doctrine manifest other forms of faith. The argument from experience generally takes a particular finite center of value and asserts that the equality doctrine has no empirical basis. Biologically or mentally speaking men are anything but equal. National or cultural centers of value point up inequality in potential for service and achievement. Polytheistic faith, which makes its judgments now from one center, now from another, is continually puzzled by the complexity of inequality which knows no neat patterns of coincidence. Attacks on the doctrine of equality which have such points of departure as white supremacy or national origin manifest a social faith which is always exclusive. "The conflict about equality does not lie

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid., pp. 73-77.



between religion and politics but between faiths directly expressed in the political life."<sup>43</sup>

### 3. Faith and the relational, responsible self

A number of issues and distinctions raised in our discussion of relational, responsible selfhood come together in Niebuhr's understanding of faith. The forms of faith themselves involve cause triads which relate self, social companions, and a third in mutual bonds of trust and loyalty. The third is a cause which elicits commitment. It is also a value-center in which the self places its confidence. The personal, reflective character of a cause is related to if not identical with its function as a center of value. The knowledge and judgment mediated through representative Thous is valuation rooted in the center of a meaningful context. Without such a focus of value interpretation would lack a point of orientation and accountability would be without judge or jury. This is another way of describing the significance of cause or faith triads for response analysis.

The convergence of themes in our analysis of the relational, responsible, faithful self is due to the centrality and fundamental importance of the cause triad as a structure of interpersonal relationships. Faith in its monotheistic, henotheistic, and polytheistic forms is a special kind of cause triad. The thirds are ultimate. The value-centers are absolute, even if only momentarily

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

as in polytheistic faith. These thirds, these objects of trust and loyalty, are the gods. For their devotees they mark the end of the movement through self-transcending causes. These centers of value must bestow meaning when all else fails.

Meaning is a crucial matter so far as faith and the gods are concerned. Niebuhr's contention that faith is a universal phenomenon is the contention that all men are committed, however unconsciously, to something which gives meaning or worth to their lives. "The faith that life is worth living is given with life itself; it lies deeper than any reason."<sup>44</sup> All men have faith, but not all objects of faith are adequate for trust and worthy of loyalty. Many of the gods to which men attach their faith cannot support meaningful existence in the face of crisis or even through the round of common daily affairs. Such gods cannot satisfy man's religious need.

The religious need is the need for that which makes life worth living, which bestows meaning on life by revealing itself as the final source of life's being and value. The religious need is satisfied only in so far as man is able to recognize himself as valued by something beyond himself. That has the value of deity for man which values him.<sup>45</sup>

The religious question or the question of religious faith is not whether a god exists, but rather what being or

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<sup>44</sup>Niebuhr, Intercollegian and Far Horizons, LVII, p. 3.

<sup>45</sup>H. Richard Niebuhr, "Value Theory and Theology," The Nature of Religious Experience: Essays in Honor of Douglas Clyde Macintosh, eds. J. S. Bixler, R. L. Calhoun, H. R. Niebuhr (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1937), p. 115.

beings have the value of deity.<sup>46</sup> What object or objects of faith can provide a meaningful context for any set of circumstances? Expressed in terms of responsibility theory, the question is what center of value can provide a sufficient focus for all our interpretations and adequate judgment in all our accountability. The religious question can also be understood in light of the forms of faith.

If it is true that faith in the sense of trust and fidelity to cause and representatives of a cause is an inescapable element in all personal existence, then the question about faith is not whether one has it or not but in what form one has it, whether for instance in pluralistic, or closed-society henotheistic, or universal form and what the implications and consequences of each form are.<sup>47</sup>

The forms of faith supply a clue to the satisfaction of the religious need. They also suggest an answer to the questions of self-identity and integrity of action with which this chapter began. The two issues are related. Polytheistic and henotheistic faiths are frustrating and divisive. Their answer to the religious question of life's meaning always leaves out some elements of experience, and their exclusive causes fail to integrate all the self's responses. The notion that the satisfaction of the religious need may involve the solution of the problem of self-identity is strengthened by the similarity between conflicts among the forms of faith and the movement through the self-transcending thirds of cause triads. In both cases there is a tension

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>47</sup> Niebuhr, Religious Experience and Truth, ed. Hook, pp. 100-101.



which seeks resolution in the direction of the universal. In fact the drive to radical monotheism is the last phase, or better, the pervasive force in the movement through self-transcending thirds. The ultimate cause short of which all causes are limited is the object of radical monotheistic faith. It is the One beyond the many, the source, sustenance, and end of all being, the inscrutable power on whom the self is absolutely dependent.

If the object of faith were only a cause in the strictest sense, that is only an object of loyalty, then perhaps the self could pledge its allegiance to this One simply by taking courage. But the object of faith is also a center of value, a cause that is trusted. Faith is confidence as well as loyalty, and neither element can exist by itself. Monotheistic faith is radical not because its cause is the principle of being but because that cause is also its center of value.

How can the principle of being, the radical action by which I am I, be the one in whom I place my confidence? How can a self trust the void at the limits of its existence? How can it say "God" to the slayer of all its gods? How can that which raises the question of meaning most starkly be the answer? The religious problem, and with it the problem of self-identity, is how faith in the One beyond the many is possible. The movement of faith from the gods to God requires a transforming power.

We have completed our analysis of the self and its most significant relations. This survey of the context of revelation has raised questions about self-understanding and meaning, about apprehending and shaping the complex interactional network in which the self participates. We have seen that responsibility theory used as an instrument of analysis can aid the self in organizing and interpreting its relations. Yet it is just an instrument, a compass in the hands of a self who does not know the direction in which his destination lies. We have also seen the significance of the self - social companion - cause triad, especially in its embodiment as the structure of faith. The faith triad in its three theistic forms can be incorporated into response analysis so as to disclose the direction and orientation of the self in particular situations. But the forms of faith are only forms. They themselves effect no redirection or reorientation.

The faithful, responsible, relational self is wanting in two respects. It has no organizing principle for the concrete employment of response analysis, and it lacks the transforming power with which to attach its faith to the One God of radical monotheism. This is the context of revelation.

## CHAPTER II

### THE MEANING OF REVELATION

In Ferm's Encyclopedia of Religion Niebuhr gives the following general definition of revelation in its traditional Judaeo-Christian usage:

The general notion which the word and its equivalents (Gr. apokalypsis, Lat., revelatio, Ger., Offenbarung) represent is that of the uncovering of the previously hidden. It receives its special meanings in Jewish and Christian theology from its use in connection with ideas of a personal or, at least, dynamic Godhead, with specific historical events and persons, and with the sacred writings.<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr's own understanding of revelation lies within these broad boundaries. My purpose in the first section of this chapter is to set forth his view in light of the possibilities and limitations of the context described in chapter i. From this abstract definition I will turn to the normative instance of revelation, Jesus Christ.

#### A. An Abstract Definition

The limitations of human knowledge in general apply with respect to revelation. There are additional specifications when the object of knowledge is God. It is

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<sup>1</sup>H. Richard Niebuhr, "Revelation," An Encyclopedia of Religion, ed. V. Ferm (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1945), p. 660.



appropriate, therefore, to begin our discussion of revelation with Niebuhr's understanding of reason and experience, and the problem of relativism.

1. Reason and experience

The self's knowledge of other entities is always in terms of the relation in which the self stands to those entities. "All knowledge is conditioned by the standpoint of the knower."<sup>2</sup> The experience of a relational self sets certain limits on human knowledge.

- a. Psychological relativism. The fundamental limitation on human knowledge is psychological or spatio-temporal relativism. Niebuhr has in mind an experiential process which involves both sense data and the operation of reason. Actually there are three sorts of limitation at work here. First, man qua man is restricted to a certain range of sensitivity, and particular men have limitations within that range. Receptivity to external stimuli is always lacking in some areas, either through the absence of the necessary faculty or through neglect. Each individual man is under a second restriction, the particular point of observation. Finite man is not capable of an all-inclusive perspective on any object or event. Coupled with these two limitations is the additional restriction imposed by the categories of reason ingredient in the organization and the understood meaning of the data received.

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<sup>2</sup> MR., p. 7:

Niebuhr elaborates a great deal on the third limitation, but the overall meaning of psychological relativism must be emphasized before we proceed. This relativism is essentially the assertion that all knowledge is of reality as it is "presented in the complex of psychological experience."<sup>3</sup> Therefore we cannot describe God or anything else as it is in itself, but only as it is in human experience. This kind of relativism is not intended by Niebuhr to negate the reality of objects that are known. The implication of psychological relativism for revelation is simply that it is subject to the limitations of human sensitivity and perspective. Revelation takes place in the experience of relational selves.

b. Historical relativism. Human experience, and hence revelation, is also involved in the relativism entailed by the historical nature of the categories of reason, the third restriction under the broad limitation of psychological relativism. A man's place in space-time, the point he occupies in social-cultural history, restricts not only his vision, but also the equipment of reason he brings to that vision. Historical relativism, as that phrase is intended by Niebuhr, means that the categories of reason themselves, not just their employment, are relative to the standpoint of the observer. In order to grasp the importance of historical relativism, it is necessary to discuss the categories of reason.

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 8.

The phrase "categories of reason" does not have a consistent technical meaning in Niebuhr's work. Categories, concepts, patterns, and images are all employed in reason's analysis and organization of the entities to which the self is related in experience. Their range of applicability varies greatly, and Niebuhr offers no precise definition of these rational tools. His primary interest is in patterns and images which, by virtue of their inclusiveness, insightfulness, or sheer historical endurance, are significant in determinations of meaning. They lend form and intelligibility to experience by relating particulars to one another in larger wholes which are themselves meaningful. We have already encountered this operation in our discussion of the interpretation element in responsibility theory. Meaning contexts are more or less structured wholes for which the patterns and images of reason provide the framework or the enlightening clue.

Niebuhr is most explicit about the importance of such patterns and images in his discussions of symbolic form.

What is the general idea in such interpretation [that of Ernst Cassirer and others] of ourselves as symbolic more than as rational animals? It is, I believe, this: that we are far more image-making and image-using creatures than we usually think ourselves to be and, further, that our processes of perception and conception, of organizing and understanding the signs that come to us in our dialogue with the circumambient world, are guided and formed by images in our minds.<sup>4</sup>

Symbolic form is another way of identifying the mental

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<sup>4</sup>RS, pp. 151-52.



patterns and images we have been discussing. As the above quotation indicates, symbols and images are roughly synonymous. "Systems of forms," "patterns," and "symbolic systems" have the same meaning in Niebuhr's discussion of language.<sup>5</sup> One merit of symbolic form as a name for the kind of mental equipment in question is its double reference. As symbolic it represents what we experience. As form it structures that experience. Thus in citing art as evidence of man's symbolic, image-using character, Niebuhr states that pictorial representation "not only mirrors but guides men's changing apprehension of actuality."<sup>6</sup> We have already discussed a symbolic form which has this dual function. Responsibility theory with its four elements is a conceptual scheme abstracted from the symbolic form of man-the-answerer. It is both a report of experience and an instrument of analysis. Symbolic form suggests the use of synecdochic analogy, the general employment of a particular experience, the formal application of something specific and concrete. A good translation for symbolic form as it is understood in Niebuhr's work is interpretive image.

These patterns and images are not chosen arbitrarily. They are products of an interaction between subject and object, between the experiencing self and the reality which is experienced. "Actuality always extends beyond the patterns of ideas into which we want to force it."<sup>7</sup> However, some images are more adequate than others because

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 152.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

they make intelligible a greater part of our experience. So it is that Niebuhr prefers responsibility symbolism to that of man-the-maker and man-the-citizen. The imagery taken from the common experience of man in responsive dialogue brings into focus aspects of the relational self which other images ignore or obscure. It supplies us with "an additional perspective."<sup>8</sup> New situations are forever modifying our images as reports of experience. These same images, as instruments of analysis, are continually shaping the understanding of things which informs our response and thereby modifies the situation.

As far as Niebuhr's own work is concerned images and symbols have their primary significance in relationships of trust and loyalty, but their actual use is not restricted to cause triads. The natural scientist employs images in his attempt to understand vast and various amounts of impersonal data. Niebuhr notes the influence which the image of the machine and the symbol of the mathematical system have had on scientific experimentation.<sup>9</sup> The problem in natural science as in moral analysis is to find the most adequate images and employ them effectively. This is the task of human reason.

Reason does not dispense with imagination but seeks to employ apt images and patterns whereby an otherwise inscrutable sensation becomes a true symbol of a reality whose other aspects, as anticipated in the image, are available to common experience. . . . In our external knowledge reason is right imagination; far from ruling out imagination reason depends upon its development.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 162.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>10</sup> MR, p. 97.

The interpretation element in responsibility theory allows for reason's employment of responsibility symbolism itself in apprehending situations of commitment. "Interpretation" is the conceptualization of an element implicit in the symbol of responsibility.

The symbols, images, and patterns operative in human understanding constitute one element of the limitation on knowledge which Niebuhr refers to as psychological or spatio-temporal relativism. But they themselves are subject to further limitation. If these symbols and images were universally present to and employed by human reason, the limits of experience would be the sole basis of relativism. But as Niebuhr puts the matter, "we are required in our time to recognize the further fact that the reason which operates in this restricted field is itself limited by its historical and social character."<sup>11</sup> Historical relativism refers to the fact that the images and patterns which condition human knowledge are themselves conditioned. That is to say, they are finite particulars as temporal as the data they organize. To abstract them from the social-cultural milieu in which they originate does not give them universal status.

Historical relativism is a logical consequence of relational selfhood in a network of interaction and change. The social - time-full self is never in precisely the same situation twice, and thus the reciprocity between the images of the understanding and the relationships they serve

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 13.



to interpret is continual. The selection and development of images is also subject to the joint authorship of the self and its social companions in numerous triadic relationships. Historical relativism, as Niebuhr uses the phrase, involves relations in being as well as in time. It points to the fluidity of images and patterns employed by a self standing in a particular relation to all others in the temporal series of events, to all others in a present social-cultural environment, and to a company of social companions which varies with each situation. Even Niebuhr's symbol of responsibility cannot escape historical relativism.

It is probably no accident that the idea of responsibility has come into view as a major pattern for self-understanding in the modern period of human history when our attention has been directed so strongly to the social character of all human life.<sup>12</sup>

Revelation is itself subject to the two kinds of relativism we have discussed. In order for any disclosure to be intelligible to man, it must meet him where he is and he is always in social-temporal relation. Revelation, like every other communication, must take place in historical experience. How then can we know with any certainty anything about God? Niebuhr faces this problem squarely. "I have found myself unable to avoid the acceptance of historical relativism yet I do not believe that the agnostic consequence is necessary."<sup>13</sup>

First it should be recognized that relativism does not deny the reality of that which is known. Rather it

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<sup>12</sup>RS, p. 69.

<sup>13</sup>MR, p. vii.

affirms the significance of the standpoint of the knower. The relational self can step outside neither the conditions of all human experience nor the particular social-temporal context in which that experience takes place. Thus human knowledge will always be relational and relative, but this is only to say that it can never achieve an inclusive perspective on an object. The self can never encompass in its knowledge the entire object or even the knowledge of all other possible knowers with respect to the object. Relativism points to the partiality of knowledge, not the incompleteness or absence of the known. It is not an excuse for ignorance and error, though it does deny the possibility of human omniscience.

The acceptance of the reality of what we see in psychological and historically conditioned experience is always something of an act of faith; but such faith is inevitable and justifies itself or is justified by its fruits. . . . As an empirical science operates with animal faith in the reality of the objects which it searches out and mates its doubts of impressionistic experience with confidence in the objectivity of experience's core, so an historical relativism can and must proceed with faith in the midst of all its criticism of historical subjects and objects mediated through history.<sup>14</sup>

Without this animal faith in the reality of the partially known, the self would be paralyzed. No item of knowledge could be trusted and acted upon. This primitive faith does not justify trust in any and all knowledge. It must be coupled with criticism. The natural scientist's confidence that there is some correspondence between human knowledge and the actual state of affairs is not confidence in a

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 19-20.

particular scientific theory. If that were the case, the falsification of the theory would end the enterprise. In fact, scientists normally follow up falsification with renewed efforts to understand the phenomenon in question. Animal faith and its fruits are most evident in just such a situation, that is when experience contradicts our previous understanding without shaking our use of reason itself.

It is important to distinguish between animal faith and its manifestations. The primitive confidence of natural science in the reality of that which the self experiences undergirds the rational, scientific enterprise. That enterprise has its own system of checks and balances functioning through particular triadic relationships which exemplify the deeper trust. For instance, the confidence in the ordered character of the universe which is the basis for the construction and criticism of numerous explanatory theories presupposes the independent reality of that which is partially known.

In chapter 1 we encountered a similar case of animal faith, namely, the primitive confidence that life is worth living. It is Niebuhr's contention that man does not live without such faith. This basic confidence in life's meaning is exhibited in a wide variety of attachments. The plurality of the gods witnesses to its diverse manifestations. Niebuhr's analysis of henotheism, polytheism, and radical monotheism is a rational attempt to show the adequacy and inadequacy of particular forms of faith in the



face of common human experience. The divisiveness and frustration his analysis reveals result from the interaction between faith triads and the actual state of affairs. The analysis does not doubt the reality of faith; it questions the sufficiency of many of its manifestations.

If we turn to the moral realm, we see that Niebuhr's responsibility theory operates on the fundamental assumption that human decision and action is meaningful. It does not question the responsiveness and accountability of selfhood. Rather it asks to whom or to what a particular self is responding and in what community it is accountable. By publishing his analyses and theories Niebuhr invites the criticism of his social companions, other participants in the religious and moral life. Regardless of the forms these criticisms take, they will manifest the basic confidence in life's worth and the meaningfulness of human action which Niebuhr calls animal faith.<sup>15</sup>

Animal faith sustains objective relativism. The self is objectively relativistic when it proceeds with "confidence in the independent reality of what is seen, though recognizing that its assertions about that reality are meaningful only to those who look upon it from the same standpoint."<sup>16</sup> One who proceeds in such a fashion must subject his assertions to the criticism of others who share his standpoint,

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<sup>15</sup> See Niebuhr, Intercollegian and Far Horizons, LVII, for a discussion of animal faith with respect to knowledge, ethics, and religious belief.

<sup>16</sup> MR, p. 22.

but he need not deny the existence of absolutes or the search for universal truths. Objective relativism does not lead to despair. It recognizes the partiality of human knowledge per se and the particular partiality of individual knowers. It invokes the critical method in order that exclusive perspectives and finite formulations not be mistaken for inclusive wisdom timelessly expounded. The fact that the self always stands in triadic relationships which involve other knowers operates as a natural though not always a sufficient check on subjectivism.<sup>17</sup>

c. Religious relativism. In addition to psychological and historical relativism, there is religious relativism. Whereas the first two limitations apply to all human knowledge, the third applies only to man's knowledge of the gods. The strongest statement of religious relativism appears in The Meaning of Revelation where Niebuhr asserts that "one can speak and think significantly about God only from the point of view of faith in him."<sup>18</sup> Religious relativism has its fundamental basis in Niebuhr's definition of God or the gods as objects of faith, objects of trust and loyalty. Niebuhr often quotes Luther in this regard. "Trust and faith of the heart alone make both God and idol. . . . For the two, faith and God, hold close together. Whatever then thy heart clings to . . . and

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<sup>17</sup> See Niebuhr, Christian Century, LXXVII, p. 249, where the author states a preference for the phrase "historical relationalism" over his own "historical relativism" because the latter suggests a subjectivism he does not intend.

<sup>18</sup> MR, p. 23.

relies upon, that is properly thy God."<sup>19</sup> Given such a definition of God, religious relativism would seem to follow necessarily. If God is the object of faith, how could we know him apart from that faith? God, the objective reality, cannot be separated from faith, the subjective activity. Faith is to God as sense experience is to natural entities.<sup>20</sup>

Relativism in this religious sense seems to have taken on a different meaning or at least more complexity than its psychological and historical partners. It is not simply pointing to a limited perspective; it is pointing to the only perspective. Psychological and historical relativism do not deny movement from one perspective to another or communication between standpoints. On the basis of a verbal description I can "see" the Empire State Building even if I have never viewed a picture of it or visited New York City. A skillful historian can enable me to "watch" the Battle of Gettysburg and perhaps even "feel" the emotions of the participants in that event over one hundred years past. But apparently I can only know God from the perspective of faith, my faith here and now. Relativism in this sense asserts that a particular mode of relatedness provides the only access to God. Religious relativism asserts that "knowledge of God is available only in religious relation to him."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> See, for example, RM, p. 119; MR, p. 23.

<sup>20</sup> RM, p. 12.

<sup>21</sup> Niebuhr, Nature of Religious Experience, eds. Bixler et al., p. 112.



We can gain a better understanding of religious relativism if we recall our previous examination of the faithful self and our more recent discussion of the primitive human confidences which Niebuhr calls animal faith. As we discovered, there is no such thing as faith neutrality with respect to one's final cause, the center of value in relation to which life is worth living. Faith in life's meaning is always attached to a god. Each god, as a value-center and a cause, determines the context and criteria of meaning for its adherents. Faith in one god prejudices the self's understanding of another god. If the movement through self-transcending causes stops with nationalism, then the patriot will have a distorted picture of world community and the requirements for its attainment. So it is that a self lacking faith in God and therefore trusting in some other god will have at best a distorted knowledge of the former. The interpretive framework determined in accordance with one value-center is not appropriate to the context established by another.

Given the lack of faith neutrality and the distorted and conflicting evaluations made with respect to differing value-centers, Niebuhr calls for theological disinterestedness.

Now religion itself makes the same demand for disinterestedness in the observation and description of divine activity or reality that natural science makes in the case of its objects. In neither case is this disinterestedness an uninterestedness. On the contrary, disinterestedness is possible in science, as in religion, only when the object excites interest for its own sake and not for the sake of any end external to it.

Religion demands that God be loved for his own sake rather than for the sake of any value, high or low, material or spiritual, which he is conceived to conserve, promote or increase.<sup>22</sup>

This theological disinterestedness, or God-interestedness, is the positive counterpart of religious relativism. Once again relativism is not intended to deny either the reality of universal truth or human access to it. Rather it refers to limitations on that access, and this is precisely the point at which there is a distinction between religious relativism and its psychological and historical partners. The self can have knowledge of God only from the perspective of a faith relationship to God.

A further clarification of Niebuhr's position is required at this point. As a Protestant theologian Niebuhr has a religious interest in God. That is to say, he is concerned with the deity value of God, the value a being has as the satisfaction of the religious need for that which makes life worth living. The religious question is not "Does God exist?" but rather "What being fulfills the need for God?" Theology and the problem of deity value cannot be separated, and thus the theological enterprise must be carried out in the context of faith. But this does not deny other disciplines the possibility of pursuing a non-religious interest in the being which the religious man calls God.

As an action or a character may be known by the psychologist or historian without recognition of its goodness, or as a picture may be known by a chemist or a physicist

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 102

without knowledge of its beauty, so the being which religion knows to be God may be known by philosophy, history or natural science without knowledge of its deity. And as the former cases can not be described as knowledge of the good or the beautiful, nor regarded as steps toward that knowledge, so in the latter instance there is no knowledge of God.<sup>23</sup>

To speak of an object in terms of its deity value may suggest a psychologism or religionism which Niebuhr does not intend. A being has deity value by virtue of its own characteristics. It is not the human desire for a god nor the self's awareness of its religious need that sustains deity value. This value, like all others, is the consequence of an objective relationship between valued and valuing beings. Values are relative to structure and organic need.<sup>24</sup> They are objectively relativistic, though now that phrase refers to the object rather than the mode of inquiry which it justifies. Subjective confidence in the reality of what is seen despite the awareness of a partial view has its basis in the way things actually are. The stubborn independence of reality is exemplified in the conflict and frustration that is engendered by polytheistic and henotheistic forms of faith. The embodiments of these forms do in fact go against the grain of the universe. The reciprocity between theory and practice, between interpretation and data, as well as the self-criticism which seeks to learn from this reciprocity, has its foundation in the structures of existence. This is as true and significant for theology as it is for natural science.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 113.



So it is that Niebuhr can speak of psychological, historical, and religious relativism and at the same time call for religious realism.<sup>25</sup> Religious realism has an objective interest and a critical method. While confident in the independent reality of the religious object, it is aware of the ease with which the relative can be mistaken for the absolute. The fundamental basis of religious realism or objective relativism in theology is twofold. The self actually does live and move and have its being in the One beyond the many, but the self is social and time-full, even in its relation to the One.

The situation may be stated positively in the terms of Augustine, that God has created us toward himself and that our souls are restless until they find rest in him. It may be stated negatively by saying that, while the Being men call God exists independently of the creatures constituted to need him, it is not possible to define his Deity without reference to his relation to his creatures.<sup>26</sup>

## 2. Faith and history

Relativism has established certain limits for revelation, and now it is our task to elaborate on the nature and function of revelation within these limits. The important consequence of relativism for revelation is that "men cannot think about God save as historic, communal beings and save as believers."<sup>27</sup> Revelation involves both history and

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<sup>25</sup> See H. Richard Niebuhr, "Religious Realism in the Twentieth Century," Religious Realism, ed. D. C. Macintosh (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1931), pp. 413-28, for a discussion of religious realism in Germany and the United States.

<sup>26</sup> Niebuhr, Nature of Religious Experience, eds. Bixler et al., p. 112.

<sup>27</sup> MR, p. 42.

faith. Niebuhr's own rudimentary definition of revelation is simply "historic faith."<sup>28</sup> How then does Niebuhr understand the relation of faith and history with respect to revelation?

Faith and history are inseparable partners. If we explain the partnership in terms of history we say that history reveals faith and its objects. This is the case because history is the medium in which faith expresses itself. The faithful self is social and time-full and cannot stand outside of history. What the self experiences of God or the gods it experiences in its own and its social companions' history. History is the arena in which the faith triads and their "thirds" challenge one another. Faith that life is meaningful, faith in a god, is always an element in selfhood, but what that meaning is, which gods are dependable, is thrashed out in the historical experiences of the self and its social companions. The conceptualization of these experiences also takes place in history. The terms of the self's knowledge and communication about deity, are products of a joint authorship extended in time.

We can reverse our procedure and explain the faith-history partnership in terms of faith. Faith interprets the meaning of history. The gods as objects of trust and loyalty define the contexts in which thought and action are significant. In terms of responsibility theory we can say that one to whom we are responding and before whom we are

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

accountable determines the framework of our interpretation and establishes the boundaries of relevant social solidarity.

Faith in the gods and history are in a reciprocal relation which accounts for the tension and movement we have noted elsewhere and the active partnership we are describing at this point. The partnership is significant because of the positive foundation it lays for revelation in history. If God is an object of faith known only in and to faith, and if faith is inescapably wedded to history, then the revelation of God will be so wedded. When we are talking about relativism we say that revelation can only take place within the limits of history. When we are talking about faith and the gods we say that revelation must take place in history. Both statements are rooted in Niebuhr's understanding of relational selfhood. "We are in history as the fish is in water and what we mean by the revelation of God can be indicated only as we point through the medium in which we live."<sup>29</sup>

At this point it is necessary to attend to a distinction Niebuhr makes with respect to history, a distinction mentioned briefly in chapter 1.

Events may be regarded from the outside by a non-participating observer; then they belong to the history of things. They may be apprehended from within, as items in the destiny of persons and communities; then they belong to a life-time and must be interpreted in a context of persons with their resolutions and devotions.<sup>30</sup>

The former, external history, deals in abstract description and serial or quantitative measurements. The latter, internal

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 63.



history, is concerned with social selves and the quality of commitment among Thous. The external view sees value as effective strength, time as serial succession, and human association as impersonal relations among atomic individuals. The internal view sees value as worth for selves, time as still present and already anticipated, and human association as personal relations among social selves.<sup>31</sup> The difference between external and internal history is the difference between the accounts of a national crisis given by a foreign scholar of history and a national patriot, or the difference between the accounts of a sunset given by a scientist and a poet.

The distinction between external and internal history is a distinction between perspectives rather than events. The same event can be subjected to both views, though different aspects of that event will be apparent according to the context in which it is apprehended. The criteria of truth or falsity also depend on the context of apprehension. Truth judgments are made among options within a perspective, not between perspectives. The dominance over the selection of truth criteria presently held by external history is arbitrary, but it is also understandable in view of the failure on the part of internal history to be sufficiently self-critical.

The external-internal distinction is a variation on the nature-cause distinction among the triadic relations

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. MR, pp. 67-71.

of the social self. There also the distinction runs ★ impersonal - personal, descriptive - normative, non-partisan - committed. It is instructive for our purposes to look at a historical event as the third in each kind of triad.

The scholarly historian and his social companions, in this case his professional colleagues, view the Civil War as an event caused by certain social, economic, and political forces and itself precipitating further domestic developments. All this can be documented from sources as varied as Congressional legislation and the diary of a southern lady. The weight of such evidence and the theories that account for it are debated among historians related to one another by their common interest in the Civil War as a historical phenomenon. The historian's personal destiny is not at stake in the outcome of the debate unless it becomes apparent that he is ignorant of certain well-known documents or deceptive in his citation of evidence. Such a judgment would be a function of the triad formed by historians in their scholarly commitment to the truth. The Civil War considered as the third in a nature triad would not itself be reflective in this sense. Nor would it be self-transcending in any personal sense. It could only draw the historian's attention to analogous instances of civil strife in other nations and perhaps suggest generalizations applicable in all civil wars. At any rate, the account emerging from such a view of the Civil War as the third in a nature triad would exemplify what Niebuhr means by external history.

Now let us imagine the Civil War as the third in a cause triad. Perhaps the self and social companions in this case are the same historians we have been discussing only their bond is no longer a common scholarly interest. Now they are committed as fellow-citizens or natives of the same geographical region or adherents to the same creed. Regardless of whether the commitment is nation, region, or religion, the Civil War is no longer seen in the same abstract, impersonal perspective. Now it is an enduring part of the self and his social companions. Documented evidence is still debated, but the criteria of truth are different. The citations carry an element of reflective judgment. The Civil War may call up a divisiveness that still persists or the loss of a way of life. It may symbolize human achievement or divine wrath. In any case it points beyond itself, reminding the social self of commitments already broken and anticipating loyalties yet to be realized. The account emerging from this view of the Civil War as the third in a cause triad would exemplify Niebuhr's understanding of internal history.

When the Civil War is viewed as internal history, as the third in a cause triad, it is not itself the cause. The self and social companions in such a triad are bound by a cause which is embodied in or symbolized by the Civil War. The Civil War is significant because it discloses something about national allegiances, or because it is a crucial development in the struggle for human dignity. It has a



personally reflective or representative character which is lacking when it is considered as external history. The difference rests not in the event itself, but in the perspective of the self and his social companions. This is not to deny that some events precipitate much more internal history than others. The point is that a single event can be understood from both standpoints.

In the case of internal history self and social companions are related by a common commitment which defines their perspective on historical events. We have already seen that faith as loyalty to a cause and trust in a center of value influences the self's understanding of its relations. The history that is inseparably wedded to faith is internal history. "An inner history, life's flow as regarded from the point of view of living selves, is always an affair of faith."<sup>32</sup> Internal history is the battlefield of the gods as they vie with one another for the attachment of faith in life's meaning. A polytheistic self participates in many histories, each giving a different account of events which have but one external embodiment. A henotheistic self has only one history but there are numerous events which are apparently meaningless. Again with history as with the relational self we face the problem of identity and integrity.

History is the scene of conflicting claims and discordant or meaningless events. But because it is the partner of faith it is also the locus of revelation. It is in history that we will find the meaning of revelation and

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<sup>32</sup>MR, p. 77.

perhaps also the clue to self-identity and the satisfaction of our religious need.

To be a self is to have a god; to have a god is to have history, that is, events connected in a meaningful pattern; to have one god is to have one history. God and the history of selves in community belong together in inseparable union.<sup>33</sup>

### 3. Faith and reason

In the reciprocity between faith and history, reason is the mediating vehicle. Given the self's faith in life's meaning, its participation in a faith triad, reason tries to give an account of the actual state of the self's relationships. It arbitrates between that to which faith is attached and day-to-day happenings. "Reason permeates the activity of faith; it organizes, compares, reflects, criticizes, and develops hypotheses in the midst of believing."<sup>34</sup> We have already seen that images and patterns play an important role in rational activity. These images emerge from experience itself and their conceptualization for use as interpretive tools is always subject to modification in the light of new experience. Like the other mental equipment of the relational self, rational images emerge and function in society. Thus, they are historically as well as psychologically relative.

Reason is not to be associated any less with internal than with external history. Furthermore, reason makes use of images whether it is functioning in the service of a committed participant or a non-participating observer. The distinction between these two uses of reason is in the images employed.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>34</sup> RM, p. 13.

Niebuhr argues that the images appropriate to external accounts are not adequate for the interpretation of internal experience.<sup>35</sup> In a broader application of the same point, it can be said that images appropriate to self - social companion - nature relationships are not adequate for interpreting self - social companion - cause relationships. The former are impersonal, abstract, and quantitative.

When the images used in conjunction with nature triads and external history are transferred to the realm of personal and social commitment they make things out of selves and its out of Thous. Criminals are products of their environment. People who disagree with the consensus are maladjusted. Machines and markets, supply and demand, cause the plight of the poor and threaten the wealthy. National action is a function of geographical and economic forces. Niebuhr does not deny the importance of impersonal reasoning. "Physiological, economic, and psychological interpretations of men, races, and nations are an inescapable element in responsible dealing with persons and communities."<sup>36</sup> What Niebuhr argues against is the primary or exclusive use of impersonal images in understanding selves and their individual and communal relations. When such a procedure is employed, one of two consequences follows. The impersonal approach is actually modified unconsciously or surreptitiously when the situation demands participation rather than observation, or, what is worse, the life of committed action

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<sup>35</sup> MR, pp. 98, 108.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 104.



is abandoned as irrational and unintelligible. Uncritical custom or individual passions fill the void.<sup>37</sup>

If we grant that reason operating in the context of cause relationships and internal history must employ personal images, we are still left with the problem of selection. Within the limits of joint authorship there is certainly room for personal modification of images and, especially for more imaginative selves, the discovery and development of alternative images. The emergence of responsibility symbolism is a case in point.

"The question which is relevant for the life of the self among selves is not whether personal images should be employed but only what personal images are right and adequate and which are evil imaginations of the heart."<sup>38</sup> Niebuhr gives us some examples of the latter.<sup>39</sup> In some forms of insanity personal patterns may be employed, but they are inappropriate. Real fears are interpreted in the context of an imaginary persecution. Legitimate hopes are seen as signs of an accomplished rather than an anticipated success. Whereas sane persons would tend to bring their inadequate images in line with those of their social companions, insane persons are only frustrated by the discrepancies and criticisms resulting from their interpretations.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., pp. 104-108.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., pp. 99-102.

Inadequate images are not employed by the insane alone. The misfortunes of individuals and groups are often accounted for with interpretive images of an enemy or an opposing community. Though the images are personal, they are arbitrarily chosen and their corrective use distorts what little truth they may reveal. Niebuhr also calls attention to individual and group egotism which uses the self or perhaps the nation as the grand interpretive image. Generalizing from this limited image precludes a real understanding of other selves and nations. The self-image is itself distorted in the absence of criticism.

The result of employing inadequate rational images is frustration and divisiveness, the same destructive consequences which follow from the conflict among the gods. The religious need for a cause and center of value which is worthy of loyalty and trust is not unrelated to the need for an adequate rational image to guide the interpretation of our relations with other selves. We have already noted the influence which the gods have on interpretive contexts and the extent of relevant social solidarity. How the objects of faith and the images of reasoning faith are related is yet to be considered.

#### 4. Organizing principle and transforming power.<sup>40</sup>

According to Niebuhr, it is revelation which meets the need for an adequate interpretive image. "By revelation

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<sup>40</sup> The explicit use of the phrases "organizing principle" and "transforming power" to refer to the two essential elements in revelation is mine, not Niebuhr's. However,

in our history, then, we mean that special occasion which provides us with an image by means of which all the occasions of personal and common life become intelligible."<sup>41</sup> The revelatory event is the event in our internal history which makes the rest of that history meaningful. The image supplied by revelation is the basis for rationalizing self - social companion - cause relations so that they can be dealt with intelligently. Revelation gives to faith an organizing principle, a starting point from which it can reason adequately. Revelation supplies the image through which the self interprets its past, present, and future.<sup>42</sup>

With respect to the past, the revelatory image enables us to understand what we remember and remember what we have forgotten. It brings continuity and meaning to our entire past and enables us to appropriate as our own the pasts of others on whom we had looked as aliens. The past in question here is not the serial past of external relations, but the enduring past that is present in who we are and what we desire. Therefore the conversion that revelation works in this past is moral as well as mental. "To understand such a present past is to understand one's self and through understanding, to reconstruct."<sup>43</sup> This reconstruction which brings to the self unity and community with mankind is a continual process. As long as there is conflict

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the phrases themselves come from Niebuhr's work (RM, p. 50), and their formal employment in this essay is consistent with Niebuhr's understanding of revelation.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., pp. 110-31.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. 117.



and alienation in the present, there is need for greater recall and appropriation of the past.

Reason also employs the revelatory image in order to understand what is going on in the present. For the narrow, conflicting patterns previously employed revelation substitutes a single pattern which enables the self to comprehend the current scene as a unified whole. This may suggest a type of formalism or conceptualization of the interpretive image which Niebuhr actually contends against. The rational employment of revelation's imagery is not the search for past patterns repeated in the present. Rather it is an attempt to understand "how our present grows out of our past into our future."<sup>44</sup> Niebuhr understands the history and development of relational selves and communities as a dramatic unity. The revelatory moment is the clue to the meaning of that unity. It functions like a classic piece of drama, an illuminating parable, or the decisive point in a conversation.<sup>45</sup> Conceptualization is useful in identifying repetitions and uniformities, but it is secondary to the illumination given by the special occasion itself.

In addition to bringing intelligibility to the explicit, the interpretive image given in the revelatory event discloses the implicit. It anticipates the future that is potentially present. The realization of such prophecies tends to validate revelation. So too does the

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p. 128.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p. 129.

ever-increasing remembrance and appropriation of the past and the continual expansion of understanding in the present.

The reciprocity between revelation and the experiences interpreted through it is a dialectic of the heart. We move from revelation as the principle of unity in a duration to our selfhood in all its tangled relationships and then back to revelation. This movement is continual and it brings increasing richness and intelligibility to both revelation and history. Reason facilitates this movement. "Without revelation reason is limited and guided into error; without reason revelation illuminates only itself."<sup>46</sup> Whether he is talking about revelation or the impersonal images employed by natural scientists, Niebuhr consistently asserts the mediating function of reason in the reciprocity between experience and the interpretive and organizing patterns of human understanding. Underlying this activity is confidence in the reality of that which is known and trust in the meaningfulness of life, the basis of reasoning in nature and cause relationships respectively.

This brings us to a second element of revelation which must be discussed in order to complete Niebuhr's definition. "Revelation means for us that part of our inner history which illuminates the rest of it and which is itself intelligible."<sup>47</sup> Up to this point we have been dealing with revelation's capacity to render other events intelligible. The revelatory image is an organizing principle which guides

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<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p. 121

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p. 93.

the self in its interpretations. This function depends on revelation's own intrinsic intelligibility, its certainty prior to any employment as a rational image. The certainty in question here involves a fundamental reorientation of the whole self. Revelation as intrinsically intelligible effects a reattachment of the self's primitive faith that life is worth living. Revelation in this sense is a transforming power.

The self has need of a transforming power because its faith is always attached to some center of value which influences its interpretation. The revelation of a rational image can only be effective if it is accompanied by a new attachment of faith to a god with which it is compatible. Insofar as the two elements can be separated and a priority assigned, the transforming power precedes the rational principle. Faith is the foundation of reason. Revelation is the moment in which we are given a new faith.<sup>48</sup>

Revelation itself involves a cause triad. Otherwise it could not effect a reattachment of faith. We recall that these triads are characterized by commitment to a "third" which is personal in a reflective sense. Such a third is the source of self-knowledge and evaluation in the same way as a Thou in an I-Thou relationship. The self is known and judged by the object of a cause relationship. We recall also that this knowledge and judgment is always mediated through particular persons and events. In our self - social

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<sup>48</sup>  
Ibid., p. 154.



companion - cause relations we stand before representative Thous rather than generalized others.

In revelation the third in question is an object of ultimate trust and loyalty. The cause triad involved here is a triad of faith. The revelatory event mediates an existential encounter with a personal third and becomes the source of transformation in self-knowledge and evaluation. This encounter is revelation's intrinsic intelligibility; it is the source of revelation's transforming power. Revelation engages the self with its ultimate reality and provides the organizing principle adequate to mediate the ensuing interaction.

In the revelatory situation the self is known and valued by an other. The movement is from the other to the self and then back to the other. It is a personal relation between a Thou and an I, and thus it is revelation rather than discovery.<sup>49</sup> The gift of a new faith is the introduction of a new relation between persons. The self's confidence that life is worth living is embodied in a new triad of faith.

The human self that is known by a Thou in revelation is known in all its relations. It is compelled to interpret these relations in light of its new faith. Revelation as a transforming power passes directly to its function as an organizing principle. It is the beginning of a new reasoning in faith. "Something has happened which compels our faith and

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<sup>49</sup> Cf. MR, pp. 143-47.

which requires us to seek rationality and unity in the whole of our history."<sup>50</sup>

## B. Jesus Christ

For Niebuhr, a Christian theologian, Jesus Christ is the normative revelation of God.

The special occasion to which we appeal in the Christian church is called Jesus Christ, in whom we see the righteousness of God, his power and wisdom. But from that special occasion we also derive the concepts which make possible the elucidation of all the events in our history. Revelation means this intelligible event which makes all other events intelligible.<sup>51</sup>

In the section which follows I will set forth Niebuhr's description of Jesus Christ. The subsequent section will deal with Jesus Christ as a symbolic form. In the third section I will consider Jesus Christ in terms of the abstract definition of revelation as organizing principle and transforming power.

### 1. Son of God

Niebuhr grounds his description of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. While recognizing the variety of past and present understandings of Jesus Christ, he asserts that "the Christ who exercises authority over Christians or whom Christians accept as authority is the Jesus Christ of the New Testament," and that "this is a person with definite teachings, a definite character, and a definite fate."<sup>52</sup> The debate over the "historical Jesus" is secondary to the actual presence in our inner history of the Jesus Christ of

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<sup>50</sup> MR, p. 139.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>52</sup> CC, p. 12.

the New Testament. It is the image of this person that is itself intelligible and brings intelligibility to all the events of our lives as selves. All descriptions of Jesus Christ must finally bear comparison with the New Testament portraits of this one, definite person.

Neither psychological nor historical relativism is denied in this approach. The New Testament portraits like the descriptions derived from them are the works of historical, relational selves. However, the partial, perspective-bound portraits are not therefore fantasies. Objective relativism does not deny their truth. It does deny that they are the only truth or the whole truth. The Christian's ultimate aim in using Scripture is not knowledge of the texts themselves, but an understanding of the reality to which they point. It is in this sense that Niebuhr refers his definition of Christ to the New Testament portraits. Furthermore, he admits the relativity of his enterprise and acknowledges the need for other interpretations to complement his own.<sup>53</sup>

In his most extensive concentrated effort at a definition of Christ, Niebuhr chooses the perspective of a moralist.<sup>54</sup> He focuses on the virtues which Christ exemplifies and enjoins upon his followers. One of the virtues such as love, hope, or obedience is often singled out as definitive because of its radical nature as Jesus practices it. Yet each of these virtues characterizes a relationship

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., pp. 14-15.



which unites it with all of the other virtues. The foremost relation in Jesus' life is his relation to God. This relation is the defining characteristic in Jesus Christ. Jesus' complete and constant orientation to God establishes the integrity of his person and sustains the intensity of his virtuous life. "Any one of the virtues of Jesus may be taken as the key to the understanding of his character and teaching; but each is intelligible in its apparent radicalism only as a relation to God."<sup>55</sup>

What is most significant about Jesus' love is its object, the one transcendent power which creates and destroys all the gods. Jesus addresses as Father the One whom men hate, ignore, and deny. The urgency of Jesus' hope does not derive from a cosmic catastrophe yet to come; it accompanies hope in the God whose universal rulership is now. The virtue of obedience is as empty as it is radical until it is understood as a way of standing before the God who creates and sustains all parties to our ethical dilemmas. Jesus' faith is startling, not because it is faith, but because it is attached to the One of whom we are most suspicious, the One who undermines all our little faiths. Apart from his relation to God, Jesus' humility would be ambiguous and liable to misunderstanding as a feeling of inferiority or an effort at accommodation.

In all of his virtues Jesus points beyond himself to God. So important is Jesus' relation to God, Niebuhr

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

chooses sonship to God as the key to Jesus' ethics.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, the most descriptive term or figure of speech which can be applied to Jesus Christ is that of "Son of God."<sup>57</sup> This relationship with God is part of a reflective, interpersonal triad which includes Jesus' social companions. Jesus' relation to God involves him in a relation to man. His continual reference to God entails a reference back to man.

In his moral sonship to God Jesus Christ is not a median figure, half God, half man; he is a single person wholly directed as man toward God and wholly directed in his unity with the Father toward men. He is mediatorial, not median.<sup>58</sup>

The mediating role of Jesus Christ, the reflective character of his sonship to God, is clearly illustrated in terms of love. The God that Jesus loves is the One we have previously spoken of as the source and sustainer of our existence, the One beyond the many on whom we are absolutely dependent. To love this One, to speak of him as Father, is to identify being and value. It is to have faith in the giver of life as the source of meaning. Such faith couples loyalty with trust. If one trusts God then he also serves his cause. Love for the Creator is love for the creatures. Jesus' uncompromising devotion to the Father of all mankind turns him in love to all men.

This triadic relation of God, man, and Jesus Christ is the dynamic of the two great commandments insofar as these commandments relate to Jesus Christ. It is Jesus'

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. RM, p. 42; CC, p. 27.

<sup>58</sup> CC, p. 29.

complete and unswerving love for God that motivates his love for man, but the two loves in question are not identical. Niebuhr refers to the words attributed to Jesus in John 13:34, "Love one another as I have loved you," as a significant reformulation of the Jewish command, "Love thy neighbor as thyself."<sup>59</sup> There is a difference between Jesus' love for God the center of value and man the being valuable in relation to that center. The love of God is marked by adoration, gratitude, and joy, while the love of man is pitying, forgiving, and suffering. The former is passion; the latter is compassion. Jesus Christ loves man not as men love each other but as God loves men. Jesus loves man as only a Son of God can love, that is out of a fundamental and all-pervading love of God. "Because he loves the Father with the perfection of human eros, therefore he loves men with the perfection of divine agape, since God is agape."<sup>60</sup>

Jesus Christ's sonship to God involves him in the same mediating role with respect to the other virtues. His hope in the God whose rulership is a present reality issues in promises of fulfillment no other man would make. His authoritative demands for obedience have their genesis not in his own will but in the will of the God to whom he himself is radically obedient. His faith in God is the reflection of God's faithfulness. His humility before God turns to man, and there it is transparent to the divine glory.

He exists . . . as the focusing point in the continuous alternation of movements from God to man and man to God;

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 28.



and these movements are qualitatively as different as are agape and eros, authority and obedience, promise and hope, humiliation and glorification, faithfulness and trust.<sup>61</sup>

As this "focusing point," Jesus Christ is the representative Thou in the pre-eminent triad of faith. He himself can be the third in a cause triad only momentarily, for he points beyond himself to the ultimate third, the cause in a triad whose body of social companions is universal in extent. Niebuhr cites this as the greatest illustration of a triad of faith. "You and I and our Neighbor, Jesus Christ, and God, the Father."<sup>62</sup> In this triad Jesus Christ exemplifies the dual response of faith, trust and loyalty, and the double movement of faith, to social companions and to common cause. "He was a man who single-mindedly accepted the assurance that the Lord of heaven and earth was wholly faithful to him and to all creatures, and who in response gave wholehearted loyalty to the realm of being."<sup>63</sup>

## 2. Symbolic form

We have encountered symbolic form or interpretive image in Niebuhr's work in two ways. We found it to be a significant element in his epistemology. Thus our discussion of reason and experience had to deal with the function of symbols and images in human understanding. The relation of revelation and history turns on the use of particular historic

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>62</sup> Niebuhr, Andover Newton Bulletin, XLVII, p. 9.

<sup>63</sup> RM, p. 42.

occasions as images which elucidate entire histories. We have also encountered Niebuhr's own employment of symbolic form. Responsibility symbolism, the image of man-the-answerer, is the interpretive key in his description and analysis of the moral life. Now in our discussion of the normative instance of revelation we confront another interpretive image.

Niebuhr contends that Jesus Christ functions for Christians as a symbolic form.

In Christian life Jesus Christ is a symbolic form with the aid of which men tell each other what life and death, God and man, are like; but even more he is a form which they employ as an a priori, an image, a scheme or pattern in the mind which gives form and meaning to their experience.<sup>64</sup>

Jesus Christ exhibits the same duality we have noted in other interpretive images. He is a symbol of the way things are, a mirror of actual experience, and he guides one's own activity. He is a factor in both the apprehension and the shaping of the self's relations.

The figure of Jesus Christ and the events associated with his life, death, and resurrection serve as parables or analogies in the self's relations with other beings. The ecclesiastical and political activities surrounding the crucifixion sensitize the self to ambiguities in contemporary church-state relations. The tragedy of Jesus' suffering awakens the self to its own part in the present destruction of bodies. Seen in the light of this revelatory image the

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<sup>64</sup> RS, p. 154.

self's day-to-day relations are with neighbors who are startlingly Christ-like. The symbolic form of Jesus Christ calls attention to the last reality in what often seems a hostile or at best an indifferent environment and addresses it as God. This interpretive image focusses on the vital presence of a universal spirit which it understands as gracious.

The symbolic or reflective character of Jesus Christ is accompanied by a formative thrust. The self for whom Jesus Christ is a symbolic form relates to his environment in the confidence that God is present and active there. The words and deeds of the neighbor are interpreted as part of a larger ongoing effort to bring victory out of defeat and resurrection out of death. The self accepts its own and its society's responsibility for individual and corporate destruction, and it seeks to tap the health-giving, whole-making resources given with life itself. Employing the interpretive image of Jesus Christ, the self sets out to transform its manifold relations as a social being.

The symbolic and formative features of Jesus Christ in the Christian consciousness are more easily separated in theory than in practice. The image and the reality it symbolizes participate in one another just as the reasoning self and the others to which it is related manifest a kind of reciprocity. Questions influence answers which in turn influence subsequent questions. The employment of synecdochic analogy and the facility of a report of experience



to serve as an instrument of analysis are manifestations of the same reciprocity that is in question here.

The dual character of the revelatory image that qualifies it as a symbolic form is the same as that of a special occasion in a friendship. In its first occurrence such an occasion reveals something significant about the friends and their friendship. In this sense it is representative and its actual repetition or its remembrance at a later time again discloses the nature of the relationship. It has a normative influence and can come to serve as an interpretive touchstone for any subsequent activity between the two friends. Because friendship is a continually developing relation, new insights may be shed on the special occasion, modifying and enriching it, but never replacing its representative and formative functions so long as it remains the most adequate clue to the friendship. Often a special occasion only becomes representative and formative when reflected upon after the fact. It can be recalled by a symbolic reenactment or a sign, and sometimes it loses its normative influence through unconscious repetition or distortion. But while it functions as an interpretive image it will both mirror and guide the friendship.

To understand Jesus Christ as symbolic form is not to call into question his historical actuality. The interpretive function of an individual or an event in the present is quite compatible with its real existence in the past. Insofar as they are historical accounts, the New Testament

portraits of Jesus Christ describe something that happened in the past. They become symbolic when they are given application in the present and the future. The revelatory event in our inner history is symbolic in its capacity to make all our inner history intelligible.

Niebuhr's contention that Jesus Christ is a symbolic form is coupled with the further claim that the use of this interpretive image is essential for an understanding of the Christian life. To deny this would be to deny the very element which distinguishes the Christian life from every other form. The assertion that Jesus Christ is the essential symbolic form for the Christian's self-understanding and guidance is not the assertion that it is the exclusive symbol. Niebuhr argues that it is impossible to employ this symbolic form in isolation. We have already noted how dependent the self is on its culture for the apprehension and interpretation of its numerous relations, and this dependence entails the use of numerous interpretive images. Even if this ever-present cultural dependence could be avoided, the use of Scripture would involve the self with a host of symbolic forms besides that of Jesus Christ.

The situation of Christians then seems to be this: they cannot understand themselves or direct their actions or give form to their conduct without the use of the symbol Jesus Christ, but with the aid of that symbol only they never succeed in understanding themselves and their values or in giving shape to their conduct.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 158.

If this is the case, the adequacy of symbolic forms used in conjunction with Jesus Christ is extremely important. In terms of Niebuhr's own work the question of adequacy must be asked of responsibility symbolism and the conceptual theory abstracted from the image of man-the-answerer. If a positive assessment can be granted, at least tentatively, on the basis of our discussion of the responsible self in chapter 1, the next question is how that symbolic form sheds light on the interpretive image of Jesus Christ.

### 3. Organizing principle and transforming power

Niebuhr's definition of revelation contains two essential elements. The special occasion is an organizing principle and a transforming power. Both of these elements are present in the symbolic form of Jesus Christ as viewed in conjunction with the responsibility image. I will deal with them separately in the two subsections which follow.

#### a. Universal responsibility. What is going on?

To whom or what am I responding? These are the questions of interpretation raised by the responsive self seeking to act responsibly. Jesus interprets all action upon him as the action of God. His responses are intended to fit into a divine will operative in all the acts of nature and mankind.

Though natural phenomena are obviously indifferent to human distinctions and evaluations, they are not interpreted as signs of a universal order that is unconcerned about matters of justice and mercy. Jesus interprets these phenomena as signs of a "cosmic generosity" which is no less



concerned over the unjust than the just. His responsiveness to the pleas of outcasts and sinners is in harmony with such an interpretation. The freedom of birds and the beauty of flowers are not interpreted as signs of a haphazard creation. They witness instead to a creative variety and abundance which exceed man's highest expectations. So it is that Jesus does not console the righteous who desire a more splendid reward. He urges the unrighteous to take note of the great gifts at hand for those who will repent. Jesus responds to natural events interpreted as "expressive of an omnificent intention that is wholly affirmative of what it brings into being."<sup>66</sup>

Jesus also responds to human events interpreted in the context of divine action. Friend and foe alike are finite beings dependent on the sustaining power of God. If the Lord of heaven and earth is Father, then even the slayer's deed is meaningful. There is no human act that is not the Lord's act. Given such an interpretation, none of Jesus' responses are careless. As responses to God's action they anticipate a divine response. Jesus is accountable to God for all his responses because all his responses are to existents related to and sustained by God.

He interprets all actions upon him as signs of the divine action of creation, government, and salvation and so responds to them as to respond to divine action. He does that act which fits into the divine action and looks forward to the infinite response to his response.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 166.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 167.

Another way to express the exemplification of universal responsibility in Jesus Christ is to speak of him as the incarnation of radical faith. Jesus' dual relation of trust and loyalty to God issues in faith's double movement to social companions as well as to a common cause. Responsible selfhood involves participation in a faith triad. Universal responsibility is trust in the universal source and sustainer as good and loyalty to the universal community as its cause. Jesus' trust is in the Lord of heaven and earth as Father, and his loyalty is to the entire realm of being. The apparent constancy with which Jesus identifies the principle of being with the principle of value qualifies his faith as radically monotheistic in form. To put the matter less abstractly, Jesus recognizes the absolute goodness of the Creator and the relative goodness of all creatures. He is related in trust to the One before whom he is accountable. He is related in loyalty to the ones for whom he is accountable.

Jesus Christ, the incarnation of radical faith, gives content to responsibility theory. Trusting in the principle of being and loyal to the realm of being, Jesus Christ exemplifies universal responsibility. In Jesus Christ the responsive self is given an organizing principle for his interpretations. He is given the answer to the question, "To whom am I responding and in what community of interaction?"

In his exemplification of universal responsibility Jesus Christ points to the universal other. As the incarnation of radical faith Jesus Christ is the disclosure of God's faithfulness. As the representative Thou in the faith triad which includes God and man, Jesus Christ mediates God's concern for man. In his own trust and loyalty he reflects God's faithfulness. What was for Jesus a response to God becomes for his successors a revelation of God. The event that elicits faith as confidence and loyalty is a demonstration of loyalty and the disclosure of a cause.<sup>68</sup> The Jesus in whom faith was elicited himself becomes the elicitor, the Christ.

On the one hand he appears as the perfect illustration or the incarnate pattern, as the first and only Christian. On the other hand his personal, historical action is understood as God's way of making what is impossible for men possible. . . . Thus he is understood as man, perfectly directed toward God as his end, or perfectly obedient to the Father; and he is acknowledged as divine, as the power of God or as act or Word of God that redirects men who had lost their relation to their end, become enslaved to false goals or had fallen into disobedience. . . . Christ always has something of this double character. In him man is directed toward God; in him also God is directed toward men.<sup>69</sup>

The organizing principle is also the transforming power.

It is the latter side of this double character which we shall discuss next.

b. Reconciliation. Revelation as a faith eliciting event, as a demonstration of loyalty and the disclosure of a cause, is God's revelation. "Revelation means God, God who discloses himself to us through our history as our knower,

<sup>68</sup> RM, p. 42

<sup>69</sup> RS, p. 163.



our author, our judge and our only savior."<sup>70</sup> This self-disclosure of God in our history is what Niebuhr is referring to in the second half of the abstract definition of revelation. It is the event that is intelligible in itself, quite apart from its capacity to bring intelligibility to the other events of the self's inner history. Here lies the intrinsic value and immediate worth of revelation. "We begin with it not because it will lead to further knowledge but because it is itself the truth."<sup>71</sup>

The manner in which revelation is itself the truth is difficult to grasp. Because it is an event in the self's inner history it is apprehended in the context of an interpersonal faith triad. It is a matter of confidence and loyalty before it is a rational consideration. This is not to say that revelation as the self-disclosure of God is irrational. Rather it is to say that it is not intellectual assent to the truth of a proposition. Jesus seen from the standpoint of an external observer, that is to say in the context of a nature triad, is not the revelation of God. The basic reorientation that revelation elicits is itself the prerequisite for reasoning about revelation. We can come closer to understanding the transforming character of revelation if we consider Niebuhr's own attempts to say what it is that happens.

Niebuhr specifies three factors in the revelatory event.<sup>72</sup> God, what the self trusts for its own meaning and

<sup>70</sup> MR, p. 152.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>72</sup> RM, p. 43.

worth, is nothing less than the principle of being. Put in terms of the second factor, the principle of being is revealed to be that which gives and maintains worth. Finally, revelation includes the challenge to the self to accept God's cause as its own. Given the first two factors which express the identity of the principle of being and the principle of value, God's cause is the entire realm of being. What happens to the self in the revelatory or faith-eliciting event is the placement of trust in the One on whom the self is absolutely dependent for its being and the pledging of loyalty to all fellow-beings. This placement and pledging is not the initial establishment of faith, but the reattachment of a faith already present. It is a reorientation of confidence and a redirection of loyalty. The revelatory event involves a transforming power.

The transformation that takes place in revelation is the reconciliation between man and the One on whom he is absolutely dependent. The problem of reconciliation is at the heart of Niebuhr's thought and it supplies the dynamic for his understanding of Jesus Christ as revelatory event. Given the universal phenomenon of faith, that is faith that life is worth living, and the trust in a value-center which this faith entails, the problem for the self is not whether there is a god but what god is worthy of its trust. The question is to what god faith is attached. Polytheistic and henotheistic forms of faith fail to give a satisfactory answer to this question. In addition to their divisiveness,

these forms of faith lead to the recognition of the contingency of the self and its gods. The devotee and its object finally face a meaningless void or a power whose meaning is destruction. What happens when the revelatory event Jesus Christ elicits faith is that the self places its confidence in and pledges its loyalty to this same final reality. The self is enabled to address this slayer of the gods as God. In this event God the enemy becomes God the friend. The transformation of the self, the reattachment of its faith, is the reconciliation of God and man.

The notion of reconciliation generally involves an element of reestablishment or renewal. In Niebuhr's understanding of the reconciliation that takes place in revelation this element is present as the realization of man's full humanity. The thrust here is not so much return to a previous state of affairs which man has undermined as it is recognition of and action in accordance with a state of affairs that is always present but hidden. Man lives and moves and has his being in the One on whom he is absolutely dependent. Man's fundamental relation is to the source and sustainer of his and every other being's existence. The inescapability of this relation is manifest in the divisive-ness and destruction which results when it is ignored or denied by the self. The universal intent which seeks to transcend every limit and move beyond every third is the positive expression of the self's relation to the single power present in all powers. The problem then is not the



establishment of a relation between man and the One in whom he has his being. It is the recognition that this relation properly involves the double movement of faith. Reconciliation is a profound reorientation of the self to the actual state of affairs. Put in terms of the forms of faith, the transformation of the self is the movement from polytheism and henotheism to ever more complete and continual monotheism in which the principle of being and principle of value are identified.

To see reconciliation as a possibility and to be reconciled are two distinct matters. The self can recognize Jesus Christ as the manifestation of universal responsibility in a universal community and yet fail to live in response to the infinite activity in all finite activity. The self can recognize Jesus Christ as the incarnation of radical faith and yet lack confidence in the principle of being. The transformation of the self, the reattachment of its faith, is the crucial factor in reconciliation. This is what happens in the revelatory event that elicits faith. The self is empowered to act on the pattern it sees in Jesus Christ. The movement from man to God is initiated and sustained by the movement from God to man. Thus the double character of Jesus Christ. The figure that is central to responsible selfhood as its organizing principle is central to reconciliation as its transforming power.

For Christians Jesus Christ appears not only as the symbol of an ethos in which the ultimate response to the inscrutable power in all things is one of trust.

He is also the one who accomplishes in them this strange miracle, that he makes them suspicious of their deep suspicion of the Determiner of Destiny. He turns their reasoning around so that they do not begin with the premise of God's indifference but of his affirmation of the creature, so that the Gestalt which they bring to their experiences of suffering as well as of joy, of death as well as of life, is the Gestalt, the symbolic form, of grace.<sup>73</sup>

The transformation that Jesus Christ empowers is never fully accomplished in the life of a self. The attachment of faith to the Determiner of Destiny is not total and continuous. But the hope for complete reconciliation and a life of responsibility in a universal community is partially fulfilled. The potential for transformation has been and will continue to be realized fragmentarily. Where such fulfillment and realization takes place the Christian sees Jesus Christ.<sup>74</sup> This is in keeping with the reflective and formative character of Jesus Christ as a symbolic form.

Even if the need for revelation as transforming power is granted and occasions of its reconciliation are admitted, there remains the problem of precisely how such transformation or reconciliation takes place. "How Jesus Christ in history, and the symbolic Christ within, reconciles men to God, or God to men, or accomplishes the double reconciliation of each to each, Christians cannot easily say."<sup>75</sup>

It is strange that the earthly fate of the one who Niebuhr calls the incarnation of radical faith does not confirm the self's suspicion of the Determiner of Destiny.

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<sup>73</sup> RS, pp. 175-76.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. Niebuhr, Christian Century, LXXVII, p. 249.

<sup>75</sup> RS, p. 176.

It seems as though the faithful one is cruelly betrayed. The response to Jesus' universal responsibility is apparently death. And yet the cross is not simply a stumbling block. For the Christian it is also the prelude to final victory. The response to Jesus' last responsible act is the resurrection.

Niebuhr faces the problem of the cross and resurrection directly. He recognizes the rational difficulties in the Christian confession at this point, and he deals with them rationally. He does not resort to a dogmatic affirmation of a miraculous resurrection. The miracle which Niebuhr grapples with is a present one. We can discuss it at two points.

First there is the actual transformation of human lives. Reconciliation, the attachment of faith to the creative and sustaining source of all being, is manifest in individuals and societies. Where there is universal responsibility there is a faith which reason is unable to supply. Trust in the originator and orderer of the many has its justification only in practice and there the issue is often uncertain. Transformation and the reconciliation it involves is the foundation of reason, not its result. As such it is something of a miracle, or at least a surd.

The second and more problematic aspect of the miracle of faith is that it is mediated by Jesus Christ.<sup>76</sup> The shameful death of the faithful self elicits faith in other

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<sup>76</sup> CC, p. 254.



selves. The spirit of the slain Jesus is unconquerable.<sup>77</sup>  
 This is the resurrection, that the one who was faithful  
 even unto death is a present transforming power. The  
 transition from God the enemy to God the friend, the recon-  
 ciliation, is inseparably connected with the man whose  
 response of trust and loyalty was answered in resurrection  
 from the dead. "Of that resurrection we may know no more  
 than that he lives and is powerful over us and among us."<sup>78</sup>

The resurrection as Niebuhr understands it is not  
 the single dramatic act of a supernatural being. It is the  
 affirmation that Christ lives as a transforming, reconciling  
 power because a life of universal responsibility, of radical  
 faith, is a response to the way things are.

Reality maintains and makes powerful such life as this.  
 The ultimate power does manifest itself as the Father  
 of Jesus Christ through his resurrection from death.  
 The resurrection is not manifest to us in physical  
 signs but in his continuing Lordship - his session at  
 the right hand of power, as the old creeds put it.<sup>79</sup>

Such a view of the resurrection is in keeping with Niebuhr's  
 understanding of Jesus Christ as symbolic form. The forma-  
 tive capacity of an image depends upon its reflective  
 accuracy. Jesus Christ could not effect a transformation  
 that had no basis in reality.

It is no surprise that an adequate organizing  
 principle is also a transforming power. The startling point

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<sup>77</sup> MR., p. 187.

<sup>78</sup> RS., p. 143.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 177.

in Jesus Christ's representation of the God-man relation is that the One beyond the many is neither indifferent nor opposed to faithful selfhood but actually supports the life of universal responsibility. To speak of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as a symbolic form is to speak of Jesus Christ as the risen Lord. He is the present transforming power because he is the true organizing principle in man's relation to God. This is not to say that if man would but live responsibly he would be reconciled. It is to say that reconciliation empowers universal responsibility.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE EFFECT OF REVELATION

Revelation is the great reconciliation, the establishment of friendship between God and man. The effect of revelation is revolution, putting straight all that is twisted, making whole all that is fragmented. This revolution takes place in the context of a universal triad of faith. It is appropriate, therefore, to discuss the effect of revelation in terms of God, the self, and the universal community.

##### A. God

The gods are the objects of faith. They are as numerous as the value-centers in which man places his confidence and the causes to which he pledges his allegiance. But there is one God beyond the many, the principle of being and value to which man is inescapably related. In the misattachment of human faith and the distortion of the self's interpretations this God is only partially manifest and then often in a negative way. Revelation in Jesus Christ is the self-disclosure of this God.



# 1. God hidden

"I believe that man exists and moves and has his being in God; that his fundamental relation is to God."<sup>1</sup> If Niebuhr's belief corresponds to the actual state of affairs, one would expect manifestations of God in his relationship with man which the nonbeliever could recognize even if he were unwilling to attribute such signs to God. An analysis of selfhood reveals problems and tensions which the theist attributes to the God-man relationship operative despite man's ignorance or denial. Such problems exhibit a natural relation to God. They do not serve as proofs or arguments either for God's existence or, put more appropriately for Niebuhr's thought, for God's existence as good. Yet if such phenomena could not be pointed to, regardless of their accountability on non-theistic grounds, it would be somewhat arbitrary to argue that man is fundamentally related to God, that the problem of God is a problem for all men whether or not they recognize it as such.

One relevant matter in this regard is the universal phenomenon of faith in its interpersonal or Hebrew meaning of trust and loyalty. In its variety of forms it manifests the fundamental affirmation that life is worth living.

It is a curious and inescapable fact about our lives, of which I think we all become aware at some time or another, that we cannot live without a cause, without some object of devotion, some center of worth, something on which we rely for our meaning. In this sense all men have faith because they are men and cannot help themselves.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>RS, p. 44.

<sup>2</sup>RM, p. 118.

Primitive or animal faith is always exhibited in attachment to a god, a value-center and a cause. Faith always refers to some being which makes the life of the self meaningful. These gods are numerous, and their forms of existence are varied. As we have seen, the problem of faith is the problem of finding an adequate god, a being that is worthy of our trust and loyalty. The self places its basic confidence in life's meaning in its family, its nation, democracy, freedom, mankind, even itself. But in turn each of these gods betrays the confidence of the devotee, either by involving the self in divisiveness and destruction or by revealing its own ultimate meaninglessness. The fundamental faith that life is worth living endures this process, and each betrayal is followed by reliance on still another god.

The problem of faith and its attachment is closely related to the search for self-integrity and the associated problems with which this essay began. Despite the plurality of the self's relations, men seek unity in the action to which they respond and in their own reactions. Sometimes the challenge of diversity and change is met with a readiness to generalize and an adherence to established patterns of interpretation. The difficulty of economic and political adjustment to domestic developments, like the attempt to impose one's own culture on another, may be due as much to the fear of abandoning a previously intelligible whole as it is to habit and egotism. Another response to the new and different may be expansion rather than containment, though still

in the interests of a unified, meaningful whole. Here the effort is not to entrench, but to encompass, to regroup and move on. Such a response to surprise encounters is evident in science when it reshapes or replaces a theory in the face of contradictory evidence. It is evident in the statesman's appeal to an international scheme of relations in order to allow for national diversity. In these examples unity is not achieved by erasing or absorbing the new and unusual, but by relating the diverse elements in new or more inclusive interpretative patterns.

The self's attempt to integrate the external forces acting upon it has its internal counterpart in the self's attempt to integrate its personality. Unrelated actions upon the self result in unrelated responses. Furthermore, actions upon the self which are ignored or denied because they fall outside the self's interpretive framework either inhibit, confuse, or threaten the self. Because the self is relational it must seek unity in its relations in order to be one self.

Our present interest in the problem of self-identity and the integration of the self's environment is the possibility that there is an intelligible unity in or behind the forces acting upon the self. The problem of unity in the midst of diversity is not simply a subjective matter. Exclusive interpretations of human existence, whether they be adhered to singly or in combination, yield divisive results within selves and society. More important, the



actual state of affairs seems to support the expansive or inclusive response to diversity. Universal intent and the movement through self-transcending thirds is dictated by a structure of reality which can only yield in tension to exclusive interpretation. Individual and corporate destructiveness is the consequence of a failure to recognize and live in accordance with a unity in being that is actually present. Until men go with the grain of the universe, so to speak, their lives will be jagged and splintered. The self's yearning for unity is matched by a hidden unity in its environment. But as long as that unity remains hidden the self must live in tension. The problem of unity for the self in the midst of a multiplicity of relations is closely related to the problem of faith and the inadequacy of the gods.

In this our personal and social manifoldness we have been left with a small seed of integrity, a haunting sense of unity and of universal responsibility. But there seems to be nothing in the world of forces acting upon us which makes that internal unity actual. There seems to be no One among all the many corresponding to that hidden self which is not free to act integrally amidst the many systems to which it responds.<sup>3</sup>

A third problem which faces all human beings is contingency, not only of the self but also of its gods. The self and all the existents to which it is related finally pass away. The power which calls them into being sustains them for a time and then destroys them. It is this power which the self confronts when aware of its own absolute dependence. The problem of the finitude and contingency of human existence is related to problems of faith and self-integrity.

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<sup>3</sup> RS, p. 139.

There is a sense in which unity is encountered in the last power on which the self is absolutely dependent. The self and all things to which it is related have a common horizon in their final reality. But this unity in absolute dependence is the supreme challenge to the faith that life is worth living. Whether the last power is understood as an indifferent void or as an interested opponent of all the gods, confidence in the meaningfulness of human existence is rendered problematic.

The problem of faith (life's meaning or value), the problem of selfhood (personal identity and integrity), and the problem of absolute dependence (the contingency of beings) are universal human problems. As such they are negative manifestations of man's inescapable relation to God. For the theist, in this case Niebuhr, these problems raise the problem of God.

How does the problem of God present itself to us who work in this living tradition [Protestantism]? It comes to us as an eminently practical problem of human existence and destiny, of the meaning of human life in general and of the life of self and its community in particular.<sup>4</sup>

God is a problem because he is hidden. This hiddenness can be explained in terms of each of the three areas we have discussed. God is hidden because man attaches his faith to value-centers and causes other than God. "God is hidden because man's exclusive interpretations distort his vision of reality. God is hidden because man ignores or actively combats the power upon which he is absolutely dependent.

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<sup>4</sup>RM, p. 115.

The hiddenness of God is man's failure to recognize and live in accordance with his fundamental relation. This failure is a misattachment of faith and consequently a distorted apprehension of reality.

## 2. God revealed

Revelation resolves the problems of the hidden God. In Jesus Christ the sources of tension and frustration become sources of creative energy. The basic human confidence that life is worth living is fulfilled in a worthy attachment. Self-integrity is found in response to a universal other in which all particulars participate. The final reality confronts man as friend. All this happens in a revelation most aptly described as reconciliation. God reveals himself in Jesus Christ, the symbolic form which provides at once an adequate interpretation of human existence and the empowerment to act on that interpretation. In this reconciling self-disclosure of the One to whom man is related in all his relations the self is transformed. So too is his awareness of this One, this last reality.

What then can be said of God on the basis of his own self-disclosure? The answer to this question will reflect the twofold nature of revelation as organizing principle and transforming power. Because everything cannot be said at once, the answer will suggest an artificial separation between these two facets of revelation and an arbitrary way of talking about the God who discloses himself in Jesus Christ. Such artificiality and arbitrariness is the conse-



quence of reflection upon an event in which interpretation and enabling power are intimately related.

a. The One in and beyond the many. The God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ is the Lord of heaven and earth, the principle of being. Niebuhr identifies God as the "principle" of being, not the highest or most powerful being. God is not a being. He is beyond being as the One in whom all existents live and move and have their being. He is the One beyond the many in whom the many participate and in whom the many are related. He is the One on whom the self is absolutely dependent for its beginning, sustenance, and end in being.<sup>5</sup>

The God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ is the Father, the principle of value. God is not the highest or the supreme value. He is not a value, but rather the One beyond value to which all values are finally related. He is the One beyond the many in whom the many participate and in whom the many are related in value as well as in being.<sup>6</sup> Life is worth living because it is lived in relation to God.

In Jesus Christ the Lord of heaven and earth reveals himself as Father. This is the great reconciliation. In abstract terms it is the identification of the principle of being and the principle of value. It is the revelation that the inscrutable power, the final reality, is God, which is to say "good."

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 32-33.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

In terms of radical monotheism, revelation is God's self-disclosure as the universal center of value and the universal cause. He is the object of trust and loyalty. In him all being and all value are ultimately united. He is the objective counterpart of radical monotheistic faith.

Radical monotheism dethrones all absolutes short of the principle of being itself. At the same time it reverences every relative existent. Its two great mottoes are: "I am the Lord thy God; thou shalt have no other gods before me" and "Whatever is, is good."<sup>7</sup>

The identity of being and value in the One beyond the many accounts for and resolves the problems of the hidden God. The revelation of God answers the question of faith and meets the threat of absolute dependence. It does so by demonstrating that the only object that is worthy of our trust, that has deity value, is the slayer of all the gods, the objects in which the self places its trust only to be betrayed. The revealed God frees the self from the frustration and fear which obtains so long as God is hidden.

As the One in and beyond the many, God revealed is the answer to the problem of self-identity and integrity of action. The complex relational interaction which characterizes human existence has its unity in God. All parties to the interaction are fundamentally related to the principle of being and value. Thus, though the self responds in a multiplicity of relations it is always responding to God. The unity of the self in all its roles is the counterpart of the final unity of all the patterns of constancy in which

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

those roles are appropriate. When man confronts the power behind the radical act whereby he is himself, he confronts the power whereby all beings are in their particularity. The self is one in all its responses to finite action because all those responses are to the One action. "In religious language, the soul and God belong together; or otherwise stated, I am one within myself as I encounter the One in all that acts upon me."<sup>8</sup>

God is the answer to social as well as internal divisiveness. The individual acts to which the self responds are interpreted in a context of relations. If the self is responding to the action of the One in and beyond the many, it must make its interpretation in a context of relations which is universal in extent. To respond to the principle of being and value is to respond within the universal realm of being in which whatever is is good. "When I respond to the One creative power, I place my companions, human and subhuman and superhuman, in the one universal society which has its center neither in me nor in any finite cause but in the Transcendent One."<sup>9</sup> Interpersonal and international conflict is the distortion of a fundamental unity in being and value.

The problem of self-identity and integrity of action in complex relational interaction is not simply a matter of subjective interpretation. The One beyond the many is objectively present in the many. The intention and rule of

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<sup>8</sup>RS, p. 122.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., pp. 123-24.



God is actual though often hidden. This hiddenness is not divine perversity. It follows from the fact that God is the One in and beyond the many rather than one of the many. What perversity there is in God's hiddenness is the result of distorted human interpretations made out of distrust and suspicion.

b. The First Person. Revelation is not simply the disclosure of the One in and beyond the many. It is not merely the assertion that if man will live as though this One is good he will be an integrated self. Revelation is the disclosure of the principle of being as First Person. It is the demonstration of ultimate unity as personlike integrity. In responding to revelation the self is responding to "the presence of one faithful person in the multiplicity of the events that happen to the self."<sup>10</sup> Faith as trust and loyalty is elicited by the revelation of Being as faithful. Integrated selfhood is not so much the result of an interpretive scheme which focuses on the One beyond the many as it is the self's acknowledgment that its ultimate environment is a trustworthy Thou.

The self-disclosure of God as First Person, the demonstration of the One beyond the many as personal integrity, is the fundamental assurance on which the self's interpretations are based. "In dealing with revelation we refer to something in our history to which we always return as containing our first certainty."<sup>11</sup> We recall that

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<sup>10</sup> RM, p. 47.

<sup>11</sup> MR, p. 140.

Niebuhr understands human self-knowledge to be rooted in reflective personal relations. It is in knowing other Thous that man comes to know himself. The self-disclosure of a Thou effects a change in the I. This is eminently so in the self-disclosure of God. It is the revelation of the ultimate Thou that transforms the self.

Talk about the identity of the principle of being and the principle of value in the One beyond the many is helpful when we are dealing with the revelatory event as an organizing principle which gives direction to the employment of responsibility symbolism in self-understanding and guidance. Talk about the First Person is more appropriate when we are dealing with the revelatory event as the great reconciliation which empowers responsible selfhood. Revelation in this sense is God himself. As transforming power revelation is not man's discovery that the principle of being is the principle of value. It is God's demonstration of himself as my author, my knower, my judge, and my savior. In revelation I am met by the One who sustains me in all my relations and who knows how ambiguous are my claims and commitments in those relations. In revelation I am met by the One whose judgment is beyond excuse because he considers even my deepest secrets. In revelation I am met by the One who values me and the entities to which I am related before and after my own evaluation.

It is appropriate to use first person singular pronouns in referring to the addressee of revelation.

The fundamental acknowledgment that the ultimate power is personal is itself highly personal. "The immediacy of the self's relation to the power by which it is cannot be supplanted by the mediation of any group of believers. . . . Faith as trust and distrust is inexpugnably personal."<sup>12</sup> The most immediate response to revelation as the divine self-disclosure is not to assert, "there is a God, and he is good," but rather to confess, "Thou art my God."<sup>13</sup> This does not deny that the self is social in its relation to God, nor does it preclude social corroboration of the self's immediate intuition. Rather it affirms the primitive nature of the God-man relationship.

A personal relation to God defines the character of social selfhood and the extent of responsible selfhood. Faith in God, the First Person, qualifies all the self's relations and holds the self accountable in all those relations. The triadic structure entailed by a faith relationship with God includes the entire realm of being. Universal responsibility takes place in a universal triad of faith. The reconciliation of God and the self is the first part of a double movement which is only completed in the reconciliation of God and the world. The transforming power of revelation unleashes a movement for universal reconciliation. Revelation as the self-disclosure of the First Person initiates and sustains a permanent revolution. This revolution begins with the radical reconstruction of man's religious knowledge, his natural

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<sup>12</sup> RS, p. 120.

<sup>13</sup> MR, pp. 153-54.



knowledge about deity.

A common solution to the problem of unity in the self and in its environment is to posit a single unconditioned being beyond the multitude of conditioned beings. But the God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ is the One in as well as beyond the many. He is not a distant observer, but a present conditioner. His unity and the unity he intends for the world is not uniformity and order, but reconciliation and the fulfillment of creation's rich diversity. God's unity is one of movement rather than static structure, and the unity of selfhood man has in response to God's unity is an orientation rather than a possession. "The oneness which the God of Jesus Christ demands in us is not the integration of our purposes and values but our integrity, singleness of mind and purity of heart."<sup>14</sup>

Power is as much a part of man's religious imagination, his natural knowledge about deity, as is unity. Man's own powerlessness in the face of the final reality upon which he is absolutely dependent often raises the question of God in the first place. Yet it is this final reality, this seemingly indifferent power, that Jesus speaks of as Father. The power we had expected deity to vanquish is God's own power. And what is more startling, the power struggle is won by weakness and self-sacrifice. Man's religious knowledge undergoes a radical reconstruction when the power of God is embodied in Jesus, "the meek and dying life which through death is raised to power."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 185.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 187.

Faith, as confidence and loyalty, demands that its object be valuing and valuable. Deity must bestow goodness and itself be a good worth seeking. The God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ fulfills the latter requirement in a strange way. Man is met by a concern that precedes his own, a good that loves rather than a good to be loved, an active seeking-out rather than a passive waiting-to-be-worshipped. This transformation in our vision of God's intrinsic goodness initiates a revolution in our understanding of his instrumental goodness. We are his instruments and in the service of goods that are his and not our own. "The self we loved is not the self God loves, the neighbors we did not prize are his treasures. . . . He requires of us the sacrifice of all we would conserve and grants us gifts we had not dreamed of."<sup>16</sup>

The self to whom God has been revealed as First Person, the self who knows himself to be known by the infinite Thou, can never return to his original starting point. The radical reconstruction of his natural knowledge of God is the beginning of a transformation of self and society. The self who responds to the One beyond the many in faith and acknowledges social solidarity with all selves is already a participant in the permanent revolution initiated and sustained by Jesus Christ, the risen Lord.

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<sup>16</sup>  
Ibid., p. 190.

## B. Self

The revolution within the self is a movement from sin to salvation, from suspicion to trust. This redemption is effected through the transforming power of Jesus Christ. It is accompanied by a reinterpretation of all the self's relations, a reinterpretation in which Jesus Christ is the organizing principle. These two aspects of revolution in the relational self are examined in the two sections which follow.

### 1. Sin and salvation

Divisiveness and conflict mark selfhood in the midst of complex relational interaction. Though many of the actions upon the self may be systematized and interpreted according to their province, the systems themselves remain in disunity. Responsibility is elusive in this multiple responsiveness, and when it is achieved, even momentarily, the cost is internal division and external conflict. The struggle for integrity and the accompanying destruction is equally apparent among corporate bodies. In terms of faith the problem of self and social integrity and responsibility is one of exclusive value-centers and conflicting causes, of gods not worthy of trust and loyalty. This human condition is characterized by mutual suspicion and a pervasive fear of death.<sup>17</sup>

The situation can be characterized as the consequence of sin. "Sin is the failure to worship God as God."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. RS, pp. 106-107.

<sup>18</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, "Man the Sinner," Journal of Religion, XV (1935), p. 277.



It is the failure to be confident in and loyal to the One beyond the many. It is the failure to identify the principle of value and the principle of being, to attach one's faith to the last reality. A self cannot stand neutral on the question of life's meaning. The failure to attach one's faith to God is the attachment of that faith elsewhere. Sin is the misdirection of trust and loyalty, not their absence. If God is the absolute value-center, if his cause is the one universal cause, then sin can only result in divisiveness and conflict. These are the consequences of suspicion and disloyalty. The Christian doctrine that man is a sinner means that "those to whom God is wholly loyal and who are by nature wholly dependent upon him are in active rebellion against him."<sup>19</sup>

Man's will is subject to his faith commitment. He cannot withdraw himself from the rebellion. The transfer of faith from the gods to God requires a power which is not at man's disposal. So it is that revelation in Jesus Christ understood simply as an organizing principle is ineffective. "Redemption from sin is possible only by a reconciliation to God, which cannot be initiated by the disloyal creature."<sup>20</sup> Reconciliation is the result of a transforming power.

Though the process of reconciliation is not complete, we are given a clearer understanding of sin and the divisiveness and conflict it entails. We recognize that the doctrine of sin presupposes the doctrine of creation. Man's

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 279.

fundamental nature is perfect, and this perfection, though obscured and corrupted, is the "underlying datum of life."<sup>21</sup> God, the Creator, is the source of our motivations and drives. Sin is not another source. It is the distortion and perversion of what issues from God. Man's created nature and his affirmation of life's meaning cannot be lost. They can only be misunderstood and misdirected.

We noted in our discussion of the problem of God that the God-man relation is inescapable. The fact that man always lives and moves and has his being in God accounts for the divisiveness and conflict which accompanies faith in anything other than God. From the point of view of reconciliation we can see that in our sin God is present to us as enemy. The unity in the responsiveness of the sinful self is suspicion and the fear of death. Protection, defense, frustration, and withdrawal mark lives lived in loyalty to limited causes. There can be no real confidence in a realm whose final horizon is annihilation. Niebuhr writes of three responses to God the enemy.<sup>22</sup> There are the few Captain Ahab's who defy the enemy and fight to the last. At the other extreme are those who try to appease God with little gifts and shallow acts of contrition. Finally there is the popular response which seeks to ignore God in a succession of allegiances which yield small pleasures. Yet all these are responses to the hidden God, the destroyer. "In sin man lives before God--unknown, unknown as good,

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 273.

<sup>22</sup> RS, p. 141.

unrecognized as lovable and loving."<sup>23</sup>

The great reconciliation is the transition from God the enemy to God the friend. The salvation wrought by God's revelation in Jesus Christ is characterized by liberation. The God-given powers are freed from frustration. Man is released from the suffocating anxiety which accompanies mutual suspicion. The promise of death is replaced by the promise of life. The death-dealing horizon which threatens man in sin beckons to him in salvation as the continual source of new life. There is an expansiveness and openness about the life lived out of reconciliation. "Redemption means the release and redirection of the vast resources of love which the Creator has put into his creature and which sinfulness thwarts and inhibits by creating internal conflict between many loves and by twisting love back upon the self."<sup>24</sup>

Salvation presupposes sin, but sin presupposes creation. The awareness of sin and the possibility of salvation are both grounded in man's fundamental relation to God. The cause of Jesus Christ is the reconciliation of man to God.<sup>25</sup> Insofar as this reconciliation is accomplished, the self is able to respond in trust to the One in and beyond the many. Revelation as transforming power is the divine self-disclosure in Jesus Christ which effects the transition

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>24</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, "An Attempt at a Theological Analysis of Missionary Motivation," Missionary Research Library Occasional Bulletin, XIV (1963), p. 5. This article was originally presented as a paper in 1951.

<sup>25</sup> RS, p. 43.



from God the enemy to God the friend. This reattachment of faith, however momentary and partial, is the movement from sin to salvation. In this context Jesus Christ represents divine initiative in the God-man relationship.

The movement from sin to salvation involves reorganization as well as transformation. In this context revelation is understood as an organizing principle in man's interpretation of and response to action upon him. Now Jesus Christ is seen as man perfectly directed toward God. As an orientation for the self in its relations, Jesus Christ exemplifies the ethos of universal responsibility.

He is the responsible man who in all his responses to alteractions did what fitted into the divine action. He interpreted every alteraction that he encountered as a sign of the action of God, of the universal, omnifigent One, whom he called Father. He responded to all action upon him as one who anticipated the divine answer to his answers. Will of God meant for him not only or primarily divine imperative but the divine action, carried out through many agencies besides those of men obedient to commandment. . . . The will of God is what God does in all that nature and men do. It is the universal that contains and transforms, includes and fashions, every particular.<sup>26</sup>

Given this understanding of Jesus Christ as an organizing principle, how does the Christian go about interpreting and responding to action upon himself and his fellow-beings?

We will answer this question by taking an illustration from Niebuhr's own work. This example will also serve to round out what has already been said about Niebuhr's understanding of God.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

## 2. A Christian interpretation of war<sup>27</sup>

The self who trusts in the One in and beyond the many interprets war in the confidence that divine meaning is to be found there. God's oneness, goodness, omnipresence, and omnipotence preclude the exception of war from divine action. "To deny that God is in war is for the monotheist equivalent to the denial of God's universality and unity - to the denial that God is God."<sup>28</sup> War as well as peace takes place in the kingdom of God, and in his interpretation of war the Christian attends to God's action toward man and man's action toward God.

To assert that God is in the war is not just a way of saying God influences man's response to war from within the emotional or psychological self. God is really active in natural and historical events themselves. Religious objectivism, as Niebuhr calls this understanding of the divine presence, must be ready to seek God's intention and meaning in any event.<sup>29</sup> This is not to argue that the search will always be successful or that it will ever be complete. The challenge is often difficult for "there is no evil in the city but the Lord has done it; no crucifixion but the One has crucified."<sup>30</sup> Yet to ignore or deny this

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<sup>27</sup> This section is based on the following articles by H. Richard Niebuhr: "War as the Judgment of God," Christian Century, LIX (1942), pp. 630-33; "Is God in the War?", Christian Century, LIX (1942), pp. 953-55; "War as Crucifixion," Christian Century, LX (1943), pp. 513-15; "A Christian Interpretation of War," Mimeographed (date unknown).

<sup>28</sup> Niebuhr, Christian Century, LIX, p. 954.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> RS, p. 125.

challenge is to admit that things happen in the realm of being that are beyond the power and reason of God. The self for whom Jesus Christ is the organizing principle has no alternative but to seek God's action in and through all finite action, human and nonhuman. The question "What is going on?" becomes the question "What is God doing?"

What is God doing in war? Niebuhr's answer is the interpretation of war as God's redemptive judgment. The simplest sense in which war is an act of God is as a consequence of the created state of affairs. Regardless of man's abhorrence of war, the mutual limitations of finite human beings are such that transgression is repelled. Transgression of one's proper limits in a single sphere of activity cannot be isolated from other spheres, so man is not able to engage in economic aggression and counterattack without running the risk of military warfare. Furthermore, war is the consequence of a universal interrelatedness and interdependence which will not tolerate man's refusal to accept the responsibilities incumbent upon him as a social being. War in this sense is an instrument of divine justice in the maintenance of order in the world. Man can neither transgress against nor isolate himself from his neighbor and expect to avoid the consequences.

Niebuhr denies that war is properly interpreted as God's retributive or vindictive judgment.<sup>31</sup> The severe deprivation and suffering of war seems to fall more heavily

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<sup>31</sup>Niebuhr, "A Christian Interpretation of War," p. 5.



on the innocent. If war were understood as God's vengeance or retribution then it would seem that the weak and humble were more the transgressors than their strong and proud leaders. War is more appropriately understood as crucifixion.

Calvary and the events which preceded it display an ambiguous mixture of justice and injustice. Supposed righteousness clothes treachery and betrayal, while death and despair strike in an arbitrary fashion. But apparently Jesus attended to God's action in and through these events. He seems to respond less to the priests, or Pilate, or the angry mob than to God the Father, the Lord of heaven and earth apart from whose power these people could not condemn, or abdicate, or destroy. The fundamental trust that God is indeed the Father will not allow a separation between redemption and whatever judgment there is to be found in crucifixion. So also with war and all its indiscriminate suffering and death. The Christian responds to war as God's action, and he interprets the meaning of that action in the assurance that it is somehow redemptive.

The redemptive judgment of war is corrective. In times of crisis individuals and communities are faced with the serious injustice of artificial racial and religious barriers. Arbitrary political, economic, and social distinctions are seen as perversions rather than preservers of personal and national health. In wartime action is taken to overcome these barriers. This effort, though never completely and permanently effective, is the result of and

itself exemplifies a renewed awareness of moral issues. The cruel consequences of egotism and suspicion confront man with his own selfish, distrusting activity and the "moral earnestness" of a God who will not allow human destruction to go unchallenged.<sup>32</sup>

Even if war is understood as God's action to maintain universal order and reorient deeply perverted human energies, one is still left with the fact that this is accomplished at the expense of thousands of innocent lives.

The maintenance of order in the universe and the internal correction of the justice of groups at war is accomplished, it is apparent, at the cost of individuals and of special people who are not maintained or corrected but slain. And some of them, we must admit, are apparently spiritually maimed even more than physically. They feel forsaken of God and they descend to the abyss. These facts about war are religiously the most difficult.<sup>33</sup>

Here again Niebuhr resorts to the symbolic form of Jesus Christ and the vicarious suffering of his crucifixion. In war God acts upon man in the maiming, death, and despair of many suffering servants. The Christian responds to this action as the first Christians responded to the death of Jesus Christ. This suffering on the part of creatures is the priceless sacrifice of the Creator that men might come to understand the true order of the universe.

How the divine grace appears in the crucifixion of war may become somewhat clear when the cross of Christ is used to interpret it. Then our attention is directed to the death of the guiltless, the gracious, and the suffering of the innocent becomes a call to repentance,

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<sup>32</sup> Niebuhr, Christian Century, LX, p. 514.

<sup>33</sup> Niebuhr, "A Christian Interpretation of War," p. 6.

to a total revolution of our minds and hearts. And such a call to repentance - not to sorrow but to spiritual revolution - is an act of grace, a great recall from the road to death which we all travel together, the just and the unjust, the victors and the vanquished.<sup>34</sup>

The trust that undergirds this interpretation of God's action in crucifixion and in war is the confidence that servant and served alike are participants in a process of universal redemption.

This interpretation of God's action in war may tempt us to simply identify our intentions with the will of God. We wage war to maintain order and restore justice. Insofar as we suffer while carrying out God's will, we are doing so as God's servants. This is inconsistent with Niebuhr's understanding of divine action. Those who suffer vicariously may do so without any notion of service to God or man. Such innocent suffering can and often does confront us with our sins. It can give us pain and initiate our efforts to remedy the situation that leads to such innocent suffering.

Justifying our warfaring activity by identifying it with God's will is equally mistaken. "God does not act save through finite instruments but none of the instruments can take the place of God even for a moment."<sup>35</sup> We are the objects of divine justice, not its administrators. Otherwise correction of our internal injustice would precede, not follow, war. Otherwise we would be taking stock of our own transgressions which have led to war rather than proclaiming the

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<sup>34</sup> Niebuhr, Christian Century, LX, p. 515.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., LIX, p. 631.



transgressions of our opponents. "The discernment of God's way in war can increase confidence in him, but not in the self."<sup>36</sup>

The lack of simple identity between God's act and man's which precludes self-justification in warfare also precludes resignation. The judgment and sacrifice of war do not come to man without his participation. Given the reality of a God-man relationship, the question "What is God doing to me in the war?" is accompanied by the question "What am I doing to God?"

Sin, the good it perverts, and the misery which follows are all evident in war. Distrust of the One beyond the many is seen in man's faithlessness among men. Broken promises and expectations of the same line the path to war. Devotion to exclusive gods which are unworthy of man's final trust lead to defensiveness and conflict.

Yet through this very sinfulness human goodness can be seen. War gives a perverse reflection of the true God-man relation. Men often wage war to keep faith with fellow-citizens or allies. Comrades in arms may have been enemies in some previous conflict, but now they fight together for a common cause. The depth of man's capacity for devotion and self-sacrifice is revealed in war though the allegiance is to an exclusive god. The tragedy of war is that for all this faithfulness and all these sacrifices there is an accompanying distrust and self-centered aggression. The faith that

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<sup>36</sup> Niebuhr, "A Christian Interpretation of War," p. 7.

life is worth living is present in war. Because this faith is attached to the gods rather than to God it is the basis of war instead of peace, alienation instead of reconciliation.

How does the Christian self respond to God's action upon him in war? What are some of the consequences of interpreting war with the aid of the symbolic form of Jesus Christ? In responding to God's judgment in war the self refrains from the relative judgments which only serve to heighten the conflict. Instead of seeking self-justification in comparison with its enemies, the self measures its own faithlessness against the faithfulness of God. Placing its trust and loyalty in God and abandoning itself and its nation as the ultimate value-center and cause, the self is freed from defensiveness in its judgments and actions. It responds to God's redemptive judgment by seeking reconciliation. The self tries to bring together what war tears apart. It is not inconceivable that this will entail further warfare. However, the Christian self responding to God must take care not to wage war in order to avoid sacrifice. Often the only road to redemption is crucifixion.

Because the self is responding to God's action it is accountable for all the consequences of all its responses to friend and foe alike. There is no exception to the redemptive process. Asian life is as dear to God as European. Black suffering is as painful to God as white. There are no limits to social solidarity when the response is to God.

The trust in God which is the basis of a Christian interpretation of war qualifies all the self's relations in war as well as in peace. All limited interpersonal triads on the battlefield, in the parliaments, at the treaty table, and in political debate must be understood in the context of the universal triad of faith. In war as in peace the self in responding to all the finite acts upon him is in fact responding to a trustworthy God. The ethos of universal responsibility understood in conjunction with the symbolic form of Jesus Christ is an ethos of trust.

### C. Universal Community

The permanent revolution which revelation initiates in the individual self also takes place in corporate relations. Social entities as well as individuals are the objects of God's judgment and grace.<sup>37</sup> The church has a unique role in a redemptive process which is boundless. The remainder of the chapter will be devoted to a discussion of the church and the part it plays in the reconciliation of the universal community.

#### 1. The church and God

a. Religion and Christianity. It is necessary at the outset to attend to Niebuhr's understanding of religion and Christianity. We have already seen that the religious

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<sup>37</sup> For a discussion of the individual and society as objects of Christianity's mission, see H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Attack upon the Social Gospel," Religion in Life, V (1936), pp. 176-81.



question is the question of life's meaning. Men have a religious need for something which makes life worth living. The gods, the objects of trust and loyalty, fill this need. In this sense religion and faith are closely related if not synonymous terms.<sup>38</sup> However, when the word faith is used to refer to the triadic structure which is manifest in a variety of human activities which are not directly concerned with life's meaning or worth, it is appropriate to distinguish between religion and faith. This is also in order when "faith" designates primitive confidence in general.<sup>39</sup> Given this distinction, the "religious aspect of faith," or simply "religious faith," refers to those particular manifestations of faith that are directly involved with the religious question of life's ultimate meaning.

As "man's relation to what is ultimate for him," religion is a fundamental and often unconscious influence on all human activity.<sup>40</sup> As descriptive of the human side of god-man relations, religious concern is an integrating force. It defines or apprehends the context in which particular self-actions are meaningful. Thus Niebuhr believes that "the reformation of religion is the fundamental reformation of society."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. RM, pp. 118-19.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., pp. 117-18.

<sup>40</sup> RS, p. 109.

<sup>41</sup> Niebuhr, Christian Century, LXXVII, p. 251.

Niebuhr uses the term "religion" in two other senses. Religion as piety includes elements such as the sense of the holy, prayer, and ecstasy.<sup>42</sup> Religion as in "organized religions" refers to such movements in human history as Judaism and Islam.<sup>43</sup> In neither of these uses is religion synonymous with faith. In the first instance the reference is to a particular kind of human experience and activity. In the second instance the reference is to a loose community of persons engaged in a variety of activities. In both cases we are dealing with something that is formed and transformed by faith. So it is that piety and organized religion exhibit conflict among the forms of faith. Piety and organized religion are "subject to" or "manifestations of" religious faith.

Each of the three meanings of religion has an appropriate use with respect to Christianity. Christianity is an organized religion. It is a loose community in which the focus of numerous and varied activities is Jesus Christ. One of these activities, perhaps the dominant one, is the practice of religion as piety. Jesus Christ, the transforming power and organizing principle in Christianity, points to the Lord of heaven and earth as the answer to the question of life's ultimate meaning.

The Christian is a "follower of Jesus Christ."<sup>44</sup> As such he identifies himself, more or less, with the cause of Jesus Christ, which is to say the "reconciliation of man to

<sup>42</sup> See RM, pp. 50-56.

<sup>43</sup> RM, p. 50.

<sup>44</sup> CC, p. 11.

God."<sup>45</sup> God is the One beyond the many in whom man lives and moves and has his being. To be reconciled to this God is to place one's trust in him. It is to be liberated for the fulfillment of one's true human nature. Because man never completely and permanently realizes this state of affairs toward which he is created, there is always a tension. Because man is never fully reconciled, Christianity is always a movement. Its participants are involved in a permanent revolution.

The fundamental direction of the Christian movement is toward the reconstruction of human faith as fidelity-trust in universal community.<sup>46</sup> Where this reconstruction is taking place, there is the church. This is not to say that such reconstruction can only take place in a church, as though there is first a church and then faith in universal community. Nor is it to say that there is a Christian god, as though Jews and Mohammedans are necessarily attending to a different God. There is a Christian relation to God and where that relation is realized, there is the church. The Christian relation to God is one of trust and loyalty. This reconciliation in man's most fundamental relation is revolutionary for the individual and for society. The church is the scene of this revolution and the point from which it spreads.

b. A definition of the church. In order to do justice to the dynamic character of the social reality which

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<sup>45</sup> RS, p. 43.

<sup>46</sup> Niebuhr, Religious Experience and Truth, ed. Hook, p. 102.



embodies the Christian movement, Niebuhr sets forth his most extended definition of the church in terms of a polar analysis.<sup>47</sup> In the first place the church is the "subjective pole of the objective rule of God."<sup>48</sup> The object of the church as apprehending subject is God. "Object" in its use here does not deny the personal, subject character of God. It affirms the otherness of God, the distinction between the church and God. Negatively speaking, the church is neither God nor his kingdom. It experiences the psychological, historical, and religious relativism of any finite community in which the One beyond the many is apprehended as God. Where selves apprehend God and participate in his cause, there is the church.

For what is the church save the assembly of people before God, or the movement of those who, abandoning all relative and finite goals, turn toward the infinite end of life? It is the ecclesia which has been called out of the pluralism and the temporalism of the world to loyalty to the supreme reality and only good, on which the goodness of all finite things depends.<sup>49</sup>

The uniqueness of the church is not that it is related to the final reality, but that it is reconciled to that reality. This reconciliation, the particular relation of the church to the One on whom it and all else is absolutely dependent, is inseparable from Jesus Christ. The church is directed toward its object and understands its object as trustworthy through Jesus Christ. As such it is the Christian

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<sup>47</sup> See H. Richard Niebuhr, The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), pp. 17-27. Hereafter this book is cited as PC.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>49</sup> KGA, p. 67.

church, but more importantly, it is the church of God. In taking its stand with Jesus Christ it points away from itself and away from Jesus Christ to the Lord of heaven and earth. In taking this stand the church acknowledges its relation to and its distinction from all other communities related to the Ultimate.<sup>50</sup>

To assert that the church exists where the One beyond the many is apprehended as God, and to further assert that the church's reconciled relation to God is inseparable from Jesus Christ, would seem to suggest that there is no reconciliation which does not take place through Jesus Christ. Niebuhr is unwilling to put the matter so strongly.

I do not have the evidence which allows me to say that the miracle of faith in God is worked only by Jesus Christ and that it is never given to men outside the sphere of his working, though I may say that where I note its presence I posit the presence also of something like Jesus Christ.<sup>51</sup>

With respect to the church a similar statement would be appropriate. Niebuhr is not concerned to define the precise limits of the church, nor is any theologian equipped to identify all instances and degrees of reconciliation. The point is that Christianity is essentially a movement of reconciliation between man and God. Where such reconciliation takes place in two or more selves, there we posit the presence of something like the church.

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<sup>50</sup>PC, p. 21.

<sup>51</sup>Niebuhr, Christian Century, LXXVII, p. 249.

The second polarity Niebuhr uses in defining the church is that of community and institution. The church is a common confidence and loyalty, a compelling spirit of reconciliation. The church is also disciplines and rituals, denominations, boards and agencies. The church is both a structured community and a spirit-filled institution. Thus Niebuhr can speak of an invisible ecumenical movement which is at once the precondition for and the result of developing ecumenical institutions.<sup>52</sup> Though either the community or the institutional pole may be emphasized in describing the church or participating in it as a social reality, neither pole is adequate by itself.

A slightly different version of the community-institution polarity in Niebuhr's work is the church of faith and the religious institutions called churches. The church of faith is "an eschatological society" belonging to that order of existence which "can neither be described in temporal terms nor abstracted from the temporal."<sup>53</sup> It is an emergent reality present in the churches but not to be identified with them. Insofar as the churches are the objects of conversion and the scenes of reconciliation they are participants in the universal fellowship of faith. In the awareness and service of the true church of faith as

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<sup>52</sup> Cf. H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Seminary in the Ecumenical Age," Theology Today, XVII (1960), pp. 300-10.

<sup>53</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Hidden Church and the Churches in Sight," Religion in Life, XV (1945), p. 114.



already present and in the hope for its full emergence the churches are themselves revolutionary forces in the world.<sup>54</sup>

The polarity between unity and plurality is also to be found in the church. It is unified in its allegiance to the One beyond the many, but its expressions of loyalty are diverse. Its many members are participants in one body. The rich pluralism that is the church has its integrity in response to the oneness of God. A complete analysis of the church must take cognizance of both poles. "Interest in unity opens our eyes to unitive elements in the church's life; it limits our vision at the same time; other embodied values, particularly those connected with diversity and with conflict do not come into view."<sup>55</sup>

Locality and universality constitute a fourth polarity in which the church exists. We think of the church in terms of churches, local congregations in their particularity, significant or insignificant among other social realities. But in its faith in the One beyond the many the local church is related to every other congregation in a universal community of faith. The self and its social companions in Jesus Christ express and represent a process of reconciliation which has no regional boundaries.

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<sup>54</sup> Niebuhr does not normally capitalize the first letter of the word "church" unless he wishes to draw particular attention to the church as eschatological society or universal fellowship of faith in distinction from religious institutions, as is the case in Niebuhr, Religion in Life, XV, pp. 106-16. The capitalization in PC is an exception to Niebuhr's general practice.

<sup>55</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Church Defines Itself in the World," Mimeographed (1957), p. 5.

The church is both protestant and catholic. It is protestant in its recognition of the relativity of all existents before the One beyond the many. It protests against any confusion of the Infinite with the finite, the Transcendent with the immanent, the Eternal with the temporal. The church is catholic in its recognition of the worth of all existents relative to the One in as well as beyond the many. It affirms the representation of the Infinite in the finite, the activity of the Transcendent in the immanent, the manifestation of the Eternal in the temporal.

The final polarity Niebuhr uses in setting forth a definition of the church is that of church and world. Here as in the subject-object polarity with which we began, the church itself is one of the poles. The church-world distinction is neither as fundamental nor as clear cut as that between church and God. The latter is the basis of the church's identity and being. The church's relation to God determines its relation to the world and its distinction from the world. In turning to the principle of being as God the church acknowledges its relation to all existents, individual and corporate. Furthermore, it acknowledges that the character of its relation to the world is one of concern and service. In responding to God the church becomes responsible for the world. Trust in the principle of being entails loyalty to the realm of being. The priority of the subject-object or the church-God polarity and its influence on the character of the church-world polarity is a manifestation

of the double movement characteristic of any triad, of faith and eminently exhibited in Jesus Christ's relation to God and to man.

It is devotion to God that turns the self or community back into the world. The significance of this double movement is not the creation of a church-world relation that had not existed previously, but the reorientation of that relation before God. The church as a finite social reality is always in the world. How it is in the world depends upon its continual participation in the double movement to and from God.

In considering how the church is in the world by virtue of its relation to God we have begun to see in what sense the church is distinct from the world by virtue of that same relation. Its special character is its recognition that the One beyond the many, the final reality, is trustworthy. The reconciliation of God and man is taking place, however haltingly, in the church. The church, identifying itself vis-a-vis God, is keenly aware that it is world and not God, but this awareness is no longer cause for despair. The church is distinct from the world in its assurance that the Enemy of all worldly gods is Friend.

Though it sounds paradoxical it seems nevertheless to be true that the important difference between the church and the world is that the church knows itself to be "world" before God while the world does not know this but thinks that it can be like God. Perhaps it would be better to say that the church consists of that portion of humanity which, knowing God, knows that man is not God and has made the decision before God that it will not play God but let God be Lord.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 7.



The church-God relation continually dictates change and development in the church-world relation. The result is a broad pattern of alternation between withdrawal and aggression.<sup>57</sup> When the church is so bound by worldly interests that it can no longer serve the world, then it must withdraw in order to reconfirm its primary covenant with God and reawaken that other-worldly interest which motivates this-worldly service. This withdrawal compels the church back into the world where it can now recognize the real sources of redemption and salvation, the emergent kingdom which its little trusts and its exclusive loyalties had concealed. This pattern manifests on a corporate and historically extended scale the double movement of the triad of faith.

Niebuhr's own writing about the church exhibits this pattern of withdrawal and aggression. His early essays call for separation from the world.

The pendulum has swung about as far as it may toward this-worldliness; . . . The old monastic virtues need to be over-emphasized if they are to make a sufficient impression upon a time which has almost completely forgotten them.

The first of these virtues is the virtue of an undivided interest in the spiritual world, conceived as standing in opposition to the present world.<sup>58</sup>

Pointing out the bondage to humanism, nationalism, and capitalism, Niebuhr urges the church to seek its

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<sup>57</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, "Toward the Independence of the Church," The Church against the World, H. R. Niebuhr, W. Pauck, F. P. Miller (New York: Willett, Clark and Co., 1935), pp. 123-24.

<sup>58</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, "Back to Benedict," Christian Century, XLII (1925), p. 860.

independence.<sup>59</sup> But as new circumstances develop out of the corruption and conversion that mark human history, Niebuhr's emphasis gradually shifts. Midway in his career he notes two kinds of irresponsibility in the church-world relation. The worldly church inverts its responsibility to God for society and becomes responsible to society for God. The isolated church is responsible to God, but for itself rather than society.<sup>60</sup> More and more it is to the latter form of irresponsibility that Niebuhr reacts. "A consequence of the decision in our time . . . to define the church in opposition to the world has been the tendency to ignore or deprecate the 'worldly' character of the church and the 'churchly' character of the world. . . . to cultivate a church life in separation from the world."<sup>61</sup> So it is that in an article written in 1960 Niebuhr seeks a reformation in the church "not now by separation from the world but by a new entrance into it without conformity to it."<sup>62</sup>

The remarkable aspect of this development in Niebuhr's thought about the church and the world is its constant dependence upon his understanding of the church-God

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<sup>59</sup> Niebuhr, The Church against the World, Niebuhr et al., pp. 128-139.

<sup>60</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Responsibility of the Church for Society," The Gospel, the Church and the World, ed. K. S. Latourette (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1946), pp. 120-26.

<sup>61</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Church Defines Itself in the World," p. 5.

<sup>62</sup> Niebuhr, Christian Century, LXXVII, p. 250.

relation and the double movement that relation entails. In the midst of his call for liberation of the church from its bondage to civilization he reminds us that "such an emancipation can be undertaken only for the sake of a new aggression and a new participation in constructive work."<sup>63</sup>

Radical monotheistic faith attends to God for its orientation in the changing world. It responds to God throughout a church-world history that is never fixed. "In the faith of the church, the problem is not one of adjustment to the changing, relative, and temporal elements in civilization but rather one of constant adjustment, amid these changing things, to the eternal."<sup>64</sup>

## 2. The church in the world

It is appropriate that an exposition of Niebuhr's theology conclude with a consideration of the church in the world. The double movement operative in the universal triad of faith is reflected in this essay. The relational self in search of personal identity and integrity of action receives its orientation in God's self-disclosure through Jesus Christ and moves toward fulfillment in the transformation of culture. The church itself is involved in a similar movement which is reflected in the significance of the church-God polarity for that of church and world.

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<sup>63</sup> Niebuhr, The Church against the World, Niebuhr et al., p. 124.

<sup>64</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Question of the Church," The Church against the World, Niebuhr et al., p. 11.



Closely associated with this double movement is the relation between religious faith and human action, or, put theoretically, between theology and ethics. Religious faith is directed toward a cause or center of value which gives meaning to specific actions. In our analyses of the responsibility symbol we have seen the importance of the interpretive contexts which are dictated by the gods. Religion is man's concern for the ultimate context in which actions are fitting. So it is that theology and ethics are distinct but inseparable. Theology without ethics becomes dogmatic and ineffective. Ethics without theology becomes rudderless in the winds and currents of culture.<sup>65</sup>

In Niebuhr's own work theology and ethics appear in this relation. Considerations of divine action are coupled with attention to fitting human response, and discussions of social-cultural action are placed in the context of the God-man relation. We have seen this in our discussions of responsible selfhood and a Christian interpretation of war. In the two sections which follow we will consider the general features of individual and social action as they take shape in the church.

a. Evangelical ethics. Evangelical ethics refers to the "positive movement and orientation of the Christian life."<sup>66</sup> Of its four primary characteristics, the first is

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<sup>65</sup> Cf. H. Richard Niebuhr, "Religion and Ethics," The World Tomorrow, XIII (1930), pp. 443-46.

<sup>66</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, "Evangelical and Protestant Ethics," The Heritage of the Reformation: Essays Commemorating

theocentricity.

The chief descriptive statement which can be made about this Evangelical ethics is that it is the mode of life which issues out of a positive relation to God, as that relation is established by, through, and with Jesus Christ. It is theocentric ethics. It is the ethics which accompanies a dominant orientation of the self and the community toward the action of God.<sup>67</sup>

The Christian interpretation of war as the judgment of God is an instance of this theocentric orientation. In war the Christian responds to the activity of a living God, not simply the threats of other combatants. The Christian ethicist must take care that he does not substitute a finite mediator of divine action for the divine agent. Church-centered, Christ-centered, or Bible-centered ethics exemplify this danger in a legalism which restricts and distorts the redemptive spirit of God. Another danger lies in preoccupation with the negative counterparts of God's glory and grace. If ethics begins with man's sin and inability to achieve his own salvation it is likely to fall into defensiveness or despair. The ethicist who strives above all to be "realistic" with respect to "human nature" may in fact give an inadequate account of man's primary and inescapable relation to God.

Evangelical ethics is a mode of life which issues from faith in God.<sup>68</sup> We have already discussed the significance of trust and loyalty as the fundamental basis of human decision and action. Faith may exert its influence

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the Centennial of Eden Theological Seminary, ed. E. J. F. Arndt (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1950), p. 219.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 220.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 222.

at such a primitive level that the self is unconscious of its consequences and declares a neutrality that is actually unavailable. There can be no faithless ethics. Conduct which is not rooted explicitly or implicitly in God is necessarily idolatrous. "Hence the great ethical question is always the question of faith, 'In what does man trust?'"<sup>69</sup>

As with the theocentricity of ethics so with its foundation in faith, there is always the danger of perversion. Theories about faith, propositions concerned with trust and loyalty, value-centers and causes, are themselves liable to become the objects of faith. Then too it is possible that the self will become so enamored of faith that it will forget faith's object. It will cultivate a subjective condition rather than an objective relation. It will come to think that faith rather than God is its salvation. The dangers of legalism and antinomianism are combated by revelation in which the transformation of faith is its attachment to God. In Evangelical ethics conduct issues not from faith, but from faith in God. In the following quotation Niebuhr brings together the first two features of Evangelical ethics in a concise statement of the meaning and effect of the revelatory event.

The recognition of this deep connection between conduct and faith is mated then with the understanding that the reformation of faith is the reformation of life and that the great work of Christ for moral beings is his work as the renewer and transformer of faith. He redeems us by reconciling us to God, by winning us out of our distrust and fear of the Holy One, by drawing us away from our despairing trust in idols and in

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 223.



self. Faith in God is the gift of God through Jesus Christ and with that faith all things are given, including the transformation of human conduct.<sup>70</sup>

The freedom which arises from the self's reconciliation to God is the third characteristic of evangelical ethics.<sup>71</sup> Negatively speaking, it is freedom from the bondage of self-concern. The self is liberated from the suffocating restrictions of self-protection and defensiveness. This freedom could simply be exchanged for a bondage to cultural value-centers were it not based on faith in the One beyond the many for whom the realm of freedom is universal community. Faith in the gods can give only a limited and frustrating freedom. The freedom of Evangelical ethics is also a liberation from the law which characterizes the self's distrustful relation to God. The law remains, but it is radically transformed when its bondage is exchanged for a bondage to God. What was man's demand on grudging slaves becomes the gracious Father's imperative for obedient sons. What divided according to artificial distinctions of race and status unites according to the universal grace of the principle of being. So the freedom of Evangelical ethics is a freedom to as well as a freedom from. Reconciliation with God is the self's liberty to love his neighbor and to do the fitting act in situations which continually confound established practices and values. Human creativity is unleashed in response to the divine creativity which is never seen by the suspicious eye.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 224.

The freedom we have been discussing is a freedom to act now. Faith in God is faith in One whose activity is not limited to some future state of affairs. God is Lord of the present and the future. He is the One in whom present and future have their meaningful connection. And so Niebuhr asserts, "the Evangelical mode of life may be described as momentary in character."<sup>72</sup> This assertion does not contradict Niebuhr's frequent appeal to the significance of the context for particular acts. Rather it affirms that because the entire context is rooted in the power and love of God the self is free to make the fitting response to God in the present. To say Evangelical ethics is momentary is to say that the Christian self has the liberty and the responsibility to act now.

Perhaps Evangelical ethics can be summarized by saying that it is the attempt to make each deed part of a "continuous action which is redemptive rather than defensive."<sup>73</sup> Its efforts are based upon faith in God whose activity is a present reality. Evangelical ethics works in the confidence that the kingdom of God is at hand. It trusts in the presence of "an ordering and sustaining process that underlies our whole life in freedom as an ordering and sustaining process of nature making for health underlies all our physical

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 227.

<sup>73</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Christian Church in the World's Crisis," Christianity and Society, VI (1941), p. 15.

existence."<sup>74</sup> To be reconciled to God in Jesus Christ is to understand that the orderer and sustainer is gracious. This reconciliation relieves the frustrating tension which accompanies the self's distortion of its relation to God. In its place there is a creative tension which seeks an ever-greater realization of God's kingdom on earth. This is the motivating force behind radical monotheistic efforts to transform culture and achieve universal community.

b. Social responsibility. As our attention moves from individual selves to social relations, evangelical ethics becomes the ethics of a church which seeks to deepen and extend the reconciliation which is its foundation. The goal of the Church is the "increase among men of the love of God and neighbor."<sup>75</sup> This increase is the reconstitution of social relations in accordance with a created order which is naturally redemptive. The church is a revolutionary force. It is in the church that the self finds its identity and begins to satisfy its drive for integrity in the midst of complex relational interaction. This liberation and the consequent fulfillment of social selfhood can only result in a transformation of culture.

The responsibility symbolism which aids self-understanding and guidance is also helpful in analyzing and shaping the church's activity in the world. To whom or what

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<sup>74</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, "Religion and the Ethical Crisis of Our Time," Address delivered at Wayne State University (1961), p. 14.

<sup>75</sup> PC, p. 13.



does the church respond, and in what community of interaction is it so responsive? The church's primary response is to God, the principle of being, and this responsiveness takes place within the world, the realm of being. The church responds in all of its relations in light of its fundamental relation to God. It interprets all finite action upon it as the action of the One beyond the many. Insofar as the church is responsible as well as responsive, it anticipates the reaction of that One to its response. In responding to and anticipating the further response of the principle of being, the church acknowledges the universal extension of its social solidarity. In other words, the church is accountable to God for all its actions in the world.

Responsibility symbolism provides a formal structure in which to relate God, church, and world, and see the scope of the church's accountability to God. It is in terms of another symbolic form, Jesus Christ, that the church understands the nature or character of its accountability. The transforming and organizing effect of God's revelation in Jesus Christ is the same at the corporate level of church and world as it is at the level of self and social companion. Insofar as the church is explicitly Christological in its universal responsibility, it responds to God-in-Christ and Christ-in-God.<sup>76</sup> God-in-Christ signifies the Creator, the Lord of heaven and earth. The church's accountability has

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<sup>76</sup> Niebuhr, The Gospel, the Church and the World, ed. K. S. Latourette, pp. 117-20.

no finite limitation. With respect to the neighbor defined in relation to God-in-Christ such factors as race, nation, and economic status are irrelevant. The church lives in a neighborhood that is all-inclusive and unrestrictive. Christ-in-God signifies the Redeemer, the Lord of heaven and earth as Father. In responding to the One beyond the many the church is responding to the redemptive principle in the many. The content of its response must be merciful. It is accountable for the salvation of the world, not its destruction. The reconciliation which is the dynamic of the church itself must characterize its activity in the world. In its universal responsibility to the loving Creator the church recognizes that whatever is good. Insofar as it acts out of this recognition, it is the corporate incarnation of radical faith.

As we noted briefly above, the church can err in either of two directions in its relation to the world. It can become too worldly or it can isolate itself from the world. In the former instance the church confuses something for which it is responsible with that to which it is responsible. In such a situation it asks not what God requires of it, but what the nation or some other finite reality requires of God. Divine sanction for a national policy or religious motivation for a civic project are examples of the kind of requirement made upon the church in the interests of finite causes. The policy or project in question may be beyond reproach, but in reversing the

direction of accountability the church becomes exclusivistic and forfeits its capacity for disinterested evaluation.

"The substitution of any society for the infinite and absolute God involves the Church in a kind of irresponsibility in the course of which it actually betrays the society it seeks to serve."<sup>77</sup> The faith of such a Church is henotheistic or polytheistic.

The opposite kind of irresponsibility in the church is a mistaken definition of that for which it is accountable. In isolationism the church fails to take responsibility for the world. It understands reconciliation and salvation only in terms of itself. In avoiding worldliness it abandons the world. The nations which the social church serves to their own disservice are left without any care whatsoever by the isolated church. This church fails to recognize that whatever is good and is worthy of redemption. In terms of the subject-object or church-God polarity, the worldly church fails to take its object seriously enough while the isolated church takes the subject too seriously. In both cases there is a consequent distortion of the church-world polarity.

The relation to God and the relation to society must neither be confused with each other as is the case in social religion, nor separated from each other as is the case in Christian isolationism; they must be maintained in the unity of responsibility to God for the neighbor.<sup>78</sup>

The church has an apostolic function to fulfill in its responsibility to God for society.<sup>79</sup> It must proclaim

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 121.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 126.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.



the Gospel to political parties and nations as well as to individuals. It must address itself to conflict among groups as well as among individuals. Management and labor are no less subject to the judgment of God than are managers and laborers. Universal intent must struggle against divisiveness and exclusivism in social groups, perhaps even more than in individuals. This is not to say that society with its institutions is in itself the source of sin. All finite entities, individual and corporate, are dependent upon the principle of being, the final reality which is also the center of value. Thus the church must be the apostle of God's mercy and judgment to social groups as well as relational selves.

How the church carries out this function is a difficult problem. Though the church will certainly speak to heads of state and the like, its primary point of contact will continue to be through the membership rather than the leadership. But this is no license to maintain traditional practices and repeat ancient expressions when they have lost their meaning and relevance.

Responsibility to the living God requires in this case as in all others an awareness of the immediate moment and its needs, a willingness to reconstruct one's own habits in order that the neighbor's needs may be met, a readiness to depart from tradition in order that the great tradition of service may be followed.<sup>80</sup>

The church also has a pastoral function to the social groups in the world.<sup>81</sup> This responsibility has grown

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 128-29.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 129.

with the realization that in our complex society individual need can often be met only through political and economic change on an institutional level. Sometimes situations of deprivation and intimidation can be corrected by indirect measures, that is through corporate structures already present. In other cases the church itself may have to establish the means as well as the will to care for the lost and downtrodden.<sup>82</sup>

Finally, the church functions as a "social pioneer."<sup>83</sup> It is the part of society most sensitive and responsive to God's action. As such it is responsible to God for society in a representative sense. It acts on behalf of society, repenting for the sins of all men and demonstrating the trust and loyalty that is truly human. We have seen that Jesus Christ is a representative Thou in a triad of faith that includes God and man. So too the church must be a representative community in the universal triad of faith. If Jesus Christ is its symbolic form, the church will participate in the double movement of faith on the corporate level. As a social entity its embodied trust and loyalty to the Creator will reflect the Creator's faithfulness to his creation. The church as social pioneer reduplicates the reflective-representative character of Jesus Christ whose love of God motivates a love for man which is in fact

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<sup>82</sup> Cf. Niebuhr, Religion in Life, V, pp. 176-81.

<sup>83</sup> Niebuhr, The Gospel, the Church and the World, ed. Latourette, p. 130.

God's love for man. "This seems to be the highest form of social responsibility in the church. It is the direct demonstration of love of God and neighbor rather than a repetition of the commandment to self and others. It is the radical demonstration of faith."<sup>84</sup>

When the relational self finds its identity and its integrity of action in response to the One in and beyond the many, and when it attaches its faith to that One, it discovers a community of reconciliation, a body of social companions faithful to a common cause. Jesus Christ is the transforming power and organizing principle in this community. He is the self-transcending third in a cause triad which is the church. To follow him is to join a larger community and become a participant in a universal triad of faith which includes God and the world. In this context Jesus Christ is a representative Thou and the church is a revolutionary body seeking to extend the reconciliation of God and man throughout the universal community.

It seems evident that as I respond in the church I respond to my companions, that is, to the fellowship of the members of the church. They have taught me the language, the words, the logic of religious discourse. But the discourse is not about them, it is about a third. To these fellow members I am challenged to be faithful, but not otherwise than in faithfulness to the common cause. That common cause is represented to me by the prophets and apostles. Yet they point beyond themselves. And even when I find that I can be responsible in the church only as I respond to Jesus Christ, I discover in him one who points beyond himself to the cause to which

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 132.



he is faithful and in faithfulness to which he is faithful to his companions - not the companions encountered in the church, but in the world to which the Creator is faithful, which the Creator has made his cause.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> RS, p. 86.

## CHAPTER IV

### A CRITICAL REVIEW

In the three preceding chapters I have interpreted Niebuhr's writings as a single unit. Using revelation as an organizing theme, I have set forth what I take to be the theology of H. Richard Niebuhr. This systematic interpretation contains an implicit argument for the internal consistency and coherence of Niebuhr's entire theological corpus. This argument does not deny rethinking and reformulation on the part of a theologian for whom Christianity itself is a permanent revolution. It asserts that certain themes are exhibited throughout Niebuhr's work and that attention to these themes and their interrelations brings into view a systematic whole where previously there had appeared a collection of essays written over a lifetime on a variety of subjects. The systematic whole has its basis in Niebuhr's fundamental certainty of God's sovereignty and the inescapable God-man relationship such sovereignty entails. Whether my interpretation of the whole is true to the parts is a judgment which must be left to the reader. I have tried to facilitate such a judgment by frequent reference to the primary sources.

The systematic interpretation set forth in the first three chapters has put at our disposal new insights for understanding particular aspects of Niebuhr's work. Recognizing the organic unity of Niebuhr's theology in the sovereignty of God and the inescapable God-man relation, we are able to relate themes which might otherwise appear disparate or even contradictory. When we are aware of the interaction between revelation and its self - social companion - God context, the movement of Niebuhr's theology can guide us in filling out ideas which he set forth briefly. Now we are in a position to interpret some concepts and distinctions in the light of others against a systematic background which suggests development in one direction while precluding it in another. The critical review undertaken in this chapter makes use of these new insights in an effort to illumine and clarify various features of Niebuhr's thought. In discussing Niebuhr's theology with his critics we will also be testing the adequacy of the systematic interpretation.

Before proceeding, I must mention a disadvantage in attending to the systematic whole. The quality of Niebuhr's writing is such that form and content cannot be separated without loss. His work involves the reader in a process of thought which is actually part of what is being communicated. Niebuhr's writing is peculiarly amenable to the method of inquiry he prescribes. That is to say, the reader enters a dialogue not with the author but with the



reality to which the author is pointing. Of course this in itself encourages the reader to do his own interpreting, both with respect to the reality in question and what the author says about it. This is simply another manifestation of the triadic structure in interpersonal relations and communication about "thirds."<sup>1</sup>

The selection of issues for discussion in this chapter has been dictated by salient features in the foregoing interpretation and by recurrent themes in the published criticism of Niebuhr's work. In most cases the section headings serve to orient a cluster of considerations, and the movement from one issue to the next roughly parallels the movement of the first three chapters.

A final word is in order regarding the published criticism referred to in this chapter. Most of it was written with a particular book or essay in mind and prior to the completion of Niebuhr's work. Since I have treated all criticism in light of the systematic interpretation set forth above, my judgments do not necessarily reflect on the merit of the particular analysis in question.

#### A. The Self

Niebuhr's understanding of the self is a crucial element in his theology. The first chapter of this essay was largely a discussion of the self in its relations, and

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Frei, "Niebuhr's Theological Background," pp. 15-16.

most of the important themes in Niebuhr's work made their appearance there. Many of these themes bear the stamp of Niebuhr's relational view of the self, and so it is that this view provides an appropriate focus for our first cluster of critical comments.

# 1. The finite terminal individual

Continual emphasis on relational selfhood raises the question whether the self is simply a nexus of relations, a subject fully constituted by its relations. Niebuhr's writing sometimes lends itself to an affirmative answer.

I do not want to maintain that there is value in the self's relation to itself (or to its potential self) apart from its relation to others. . . . The theory of value I am seeking to present is through and through social; I know of no self-relatedness apart from other-relatedness or self-alienation apart from alienation from the other. Potentiality in the whole realm of being is an important component in the situation in which there is value but the basis of this relational value theory is not the relation of existence to essence, it is that of self to other.<sup>2</sup>

To be a self in the presence of other selves is not a derivative experience but primordial. To be able to say that I am I is not an inference from the statement that I think thoughts nor from the statement that I have a law-acknowledging conscience. It is, rather, the acknowledgment of my existence as the counterpart of another self. The exploration of this dimension of self-existence has taken place in many areas of modern man's thinking; many lines of inquiry have converged on the recognition that the self is fundamentally social, in this sense that it is a being which not only knows itself in relation to other selves but exists as self only in that relation.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to such statements concerning the social character of selfhood, Niebuhr's use of response symbolism suggests to some readers a passiveness which seems to

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<sup>2</sup>RM, p. 105, n. 1.

<sup>3</sup>RS, p. 71.

support the view that the self is nothing but a collection of relations.

A number of major themes in Niebuhr's work imply the denial of such an interpretation. The dialogical understanding of interpersonal relations as well as revelation itself would be undermined if parties to the dialogue did not have some self identity apart from the communicative relationship. Responsibility theory would be groundless without moral agents, "self-acting beings" that employ interpretation in their own "self-defining conduct."<sup>4</sup> The self could not make a contribution to the joint authorship of its own conscience were it not a distinct individual, "never wholly dependent upon, as it is never wholly independent of, the Thou and the You."<sup>5</sup> What Niebuhr has written about the doctrine of creation,<sup>6</sup> absolute dependence,<sup>7</sup> and social existentialism<sup>8</sup> further substantiates the view that he does not reduce the self to a mere convergence of relations. It is difficult to imagine how such a self "acts, defines, decides, chooses", or otherwise moves out from itself."<sup>9</sup>

The ambiguity which gives rise to misinterpretation, to the mistaken notion that the self is simply the sum of its relations, is rooted in Niebuhr's consistent avoidance

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 55-57.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>6</sup> Niebuhr, Journal of Religion, XV, p. 273.

<sup>7</sup> RS, pp. 109-15.

<sup>8</sup> CC, pp. 241-49.

<sup>9</sup> RS, pp. 92-93.



of metaphysical analysis. Niebuhr, like his response analysis of the moral life, always "begins with the question, not about the self as it is in itself, but as it is in its response-relations to what is given with it and to it."<sup>10</sup> Epistemological relativism and relational self-analysis are so dominant in Niebuhr's anthropology that the affirmation of relational selfhood overshadows the denial, seldom explicit, that the self is nothing more than its relations. "We know ourselves only in the presence of another; we are not entitled to affirm on this ground that we exist only in the presence of another."<sup>11</sup>

Given the apparent need for a self which is not exhaustively constituted by its relations and the lack of such analysis as would focus on this issue, it is important for us to ascertain in greater detail whether Niebuhr's position is in fact amenable to an understanding of the self as a "finite terminal individual." This phrase is taken from an essay in which Julian Hartt deals with the question we have been discussing.<sup>12</sup>

Hartt does not argue with Niebuhr's contention that we always find ourselves in relations. He does maintain that there is a primary cognition or apprehension of the self as a terminal individual, "an actual entity which is

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>11</sup> Niebuhr, Journal of Philosophy, XLII, p. 353.

<sup>12</sup> Julian Hartt, "The Situation of the Believer," FE, pp. 225-44.

not exhaustively constituted by its relations and which is therefore an irreducible 'term,' a 'substantive,' etc., in the ordo essendi."<sup>13</sup> In support of this claim Hartt undertakes an ontological analysis of the situation of the believer.

The situation of the believer is not itself apprehended by belief, [disposition of the mind to accept an assertion or a proposal as true; "will" the prime mover, "understanding" a secondary mover]. The situation of the believer is the content of a primary cognition [act by which an event is registered in the mind or by which a quality of an actual entity is grasped as such by the mind; seizure by the actualities]. Here we must make a distinction in the meaning of "situation." The term suggests, on the one hand, the realities of one's place in history and culture and, on the other, one's mode of being qua being. It may be granted that what is here divided analytically is concretely indivisible; and furthermore, that how one is concerned about his mode of being qua being may reflect the mood of a cultural ethos and epoch. Nonetheless, "cultural situation" and "ontological situation" are not purely substitutable for each other. What suffices as analysis and interpretation of one will not suffice for the other.

The ontological situation is grasped in a primary cognition or apprehension. A primary apprehension is one not mediated or otherwise determined by society and culture. It is a point of raw encounter of the self and being. If for the moment we may employ the terms of sensory perception, a primary apprehension yields (or relates the self to) a "brute fact-datum." To recognize and, even more, to name properly and acceptably what is so grasped involves reflective and expressive activities upon which the social context exercises considerable influence. But the activities of recognition and of naming do not exhaust cognition, the primary element of which is apprehension or the grasping of what is.<sup>14</sup>

I have quoted Hartt at such length because these two paragraphs set forth distinctly the relation between Niebuhr's analysis of the "cultural situation" and the analysis of

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 227.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 227-28.

the "ontological situation" which is altogether lacking in his work. Despite this lack, Niebuhr's own analysis reveals indirectly a situation strikingly similar to the one described in Hartt's essay. If historical-cultural relations and one's mode of being qua being are analytically divisible but concretely indivisible then apparently Niebuhr's position allows for a direct apprehension of the situation of the believer, a situation which includes the self as a finite terminal individual.

According to Hartt, the ontological situation is apprehended as existence, finitude, and personhood. First, "I know that I am (exist)."<sup>15</sup> It is indubitably the case that something is going on and that the activity apprehended is immediately related to a subject-being. When I ask who or what is acting upon me I have already moved beyond the primary cognition of my own existence as the one being acted upon. Thus Niebuhr's discussions of the self in its response-relations do not confront the phenomenon of self-apprehension of one's own existence. In his description of responsibility in absolute dependence, however, Niebuhr does point to the immediate cognition of existence, the apprehension that "I am."

"I am alive, therefore I am." . . . "I think, therefore I am." . . . "I feel, therefore I am." In all these statements the "I" has been posited in the premise. My self-existence is not deduced from something that is more evidently the case than that I am. There is no way of moving from the impersonal statements that

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 228.



thinking is going on, or that living is in process, or that feeling occurs, to the conclusion that therefore I am. Only if I posit the self can I refer this thinking, living, feeling, to myself.<sup>16</sup>

"I know that I exist as a finite being."<sup>17</sup> This is another element in Hartt's description of the primary self-apprehension of the terminal individual. I am the subject of activity which is determinate, limited, and bounded. The activity which confronts its subject with self-existence is particular, has a beginning and an end, and is exclusive. Finitude is an important concept for Niebuhr. It raises the religious question, the question of life's ultimate meaning. Furthermore, it is in the face of the determinate, limited, and bounded character of human experience that Niebuhr adopts his epistemological relativism. But this is to deal with finitude at the reflective level and in the context of natural and interpersonal relations. In the ontological situation under discussion here, the apprehension of the essential limitation of one's own being is immediate. Niebuhr seems to have this apprehension in mind when he puzzles over the "thus-ness and so-ness" of the self's given historicity. The question is not only why I am, but why I am present with "this body, this mind, this emotional equipment, this religion," why I am I.<sup>18</sup> Contingency and dependence are expressions of the self's inexplicable presence here and now, its being subject to determinate, limited, and bounded activity.

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<sup>16</sup>RS, pp. 109-10.

<sup>17</sup>Hartt, p. 228.

<sup>18</sup>RS, p. 112.

The final dimension of the ontological situation as it is grasped by the self is personhood. "I know that I am a person."<sup>19</sup> Without the cognition of myself as at once apprehending and being apprehended by an other, I have yet to become aware of the full complexity of subject-being. Hartt's description of personhood is quite similar to passages in Niebuhr's writing which deal with the self in its social relations with the Thou.<sup>20</sup> It is at this point that Niebuhr and Hartt come closest to saying the same thing in their differing approaches to the self. Perhaps it is here that the "cultural situation" is most transparent to the "ontological situation," or at least to one dimension of that situation. Yet it is Niebuhr's repeated attention to just this aspect of selfhood which renders ambiguous the presence of the terminal individual in his anthropology. Hartt puts the matter as follows:

It can be said with some propriety that to be as a person and to know oneself as person is to be grasped by activity which arises and is sustained beyond oneself but whose meaning and essential character come to light - are revealed - in oneself. There is something to be gained in so putting it; and this something is a clear gain over the atomizing tendencies of modern individualism. But there is also a danger in so putting it; and this danger is oblivion of the finite terminal individual. It appears to me that Niebuhr's view of the self and its relations sails perilously close to this reef.<sup>21</sup>

Niebuhr does sail "perilously close" to this reef, but he does not run aground. Our brief comparison with

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<sup>19</sup> Hartt, p. 229.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Hartt, p. 230; MR, pp. 145-57; RS, pp. 72-73.

<sup>21</sup> Hartt, p. 230.

Hartt's ontological analysis supports this conclusion. While Niebuhr does not deal explicitly with the primary apprehension of the ontological situation, his position allows for the finite terminal individual so apprehended.

Hartt goes on to contend for an understanding of the terminal individual as an integral agent. He argues that the relational-nexus conception of the human situation is not only incorrect in itself, but inadequate as a metaphysical basis for Niebuhr's dialogical view of revelation.<sup>22</sup> Once again I find Niebuhr's work on the self compatible with Hartt's analysis, though the latter is operating at a different level. I must give some support for my conclusion since contrary findings would seriously undermine the connection between Niebuhr's anthropology and his concept of revelation. I also want to call attention to the variety of problems which follow from Niebuhr's failure to pursue metaphysical questions. The consequences are less serious in Niebuhr's anthropology than in his theology.

Hartt's rough sketch of an argument for the identity of the self through passage moves from the "multiplicity and real differences in 'phases' of action to a real, potent, unifying and organizing 'center.'"<sup>23</sup> The argument parallels Niebuhr's discussion of the patterns of constancy which are the bases of personal identity and interpersonal communication in I-Thou-You relations.<sup>24</sup> The elements of

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 230-37.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 232.

<sup>24</sup> See RS, pp. 77-78.



interpretation and anticipation in responsibility theory take for granted the presence and activity of the sort of "president being" Hartt is arguing for.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, response analysis would be pointless if it could not be presupposed of both the actor and the respondent that "he recognizes phases of action and apprehends aims as being his own, and as being himself in the multiplicity of events and in the richness and confusion of concrete experience."<sup>26</sup>

The integral agent concept of the self is superior to its relational-nexus competitor in meeting the conditions for participation in the "give-and-take of Creation and Revelation."<sup>27</sup> Hartt argues that if these conditions are not met in a situation that is in some sense antecedent to revelation, that is if the divine self-disclosure is not only an address but also the initial definition or constitution of the addressee, then revelation is a divine monologue. I will mention these conditions present in the revelatory situation and show that in each case Niebuhr distinguishes without isolating their being "planted out" and their being "brought to fruition."

Potency and efficacy in agency constitute one condition for participation in revelation.<sup>28</sup> Potency is not simply the agent's power, but that power in relation to possibility. Decision and act are the efficacious union of power and possibility. The self must come to be as a

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., pp. 61-65.

<sup>26</sup> Hartt, p. 233.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 234.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 234-35.

potent, efficacious agent before it can emerge into full personhood in response to revelation. "If I am involved in the activity of Revelation as a 'recipient' I must first be given before I can make a response to what I 'hear.' What I hear is God; but the instrument of hearing is the self itself."<sup>29</sup> In Niebuhr's anthropology the search for a fitting response implies the dynamic relation of power and possibility. The frustrated efficacy of responses that do not fit, responses that fail to achieve a fruitful union of power and possibility, often prepares the way for revelation. In any case, the situation of the believer for Niebuhr is the situation of man-the-answerer responding to the action of God.

The power to know is another condition for participation in revelation understood dialogically.<sup>30</sup> The integral self or efficacious agent responds in and to a situation. This necessitates the apprehension of structural features involving formal being. "A formal principle of being is involved wherever something is apprehended as acting or behaving characteristically. So, to identify something is to recognize it in a welter of occurrences as having a structure of its own, that is, an 'essence' or formal nature."<sup>31</sup> Both God and the integral self are known in the revelatory situation. The cognitive powers required of the self according to Hartt's analysis are also revealed in

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 235.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., pp. 235-36.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 235.

Niebuhr's historical-cultural analysis of interpretation and anticipation in the context of response relations. Such powers are a necessary ingredient in the move from responsiveness to responsibility and thus are certainly operative in the situation of the believer.

Whatever else we may need to say about ourselves in defining ourselves, we shall need, apparently, always to say that we are characterized by awareness and that this awareness is more or less that of an intelligence which identifies, compares, analyzes, and relates events so that they come to us not as brute actions, but as understood and as having meaning.<sup>32</sup>

The third and final condition for participation in revelation set forth in Hartt's essay is the possession and employment of the powers of self-relation, "those activities by which the self apprehends and reacts to a place and a function in a situation."<sup>33</sup> Feeling, the "spontaneous and immediate assessment and response to a situation," and will, less spontaneous and incorporating structural features of the situation, exhibit the self-relating activities of the finite terminal individual. The situation of the believer is one in which the self responds as an individual to the divine disclosure. In Niebuhr's analysis the self-relating of the participant in revelation is expressed in trust and loyalty, confidence and devotion. Such faith is not simply a function of the self-God relation. Though the self always stands in that relation, it acknowledges new situations and forms new allegiances. The attachment of faith is not simply a passive reaction.

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<sup>32</sup>  
RS, p. 61.

<sup>33</sup>  
Hartt, p. 236.



It appears that Niebuhr's analysis of the "cultural situation" is compatible with Hartt's analysis of the "ontological situation," and that the former implies the presence of a finite terminal individual, though it seldom makes reference to an immediate self-apprehension. On the matter of compatibility, Hartt implies the conclusion I have drawn.<sup>34</sup> On the second point he is explicit. "The central contention is that persons cannot be resolved or reduced into nexus of relations, for ~~then~~ the relations are left without ground and without meaning. I believe here at the end Niebuhr concurs."<sup>35</sup>

In his discussion of the conditions of integral selfhood Hartt repeatedly asserts, explicitly and by implication, that the doctrines of creation and revelation are indivisible.<sup>36</sup> This means that the situation of the believer is one in which the self who has been called into being emerges into full personhood. In attending to the primary cognition of the situation of the believer Hartt has disclosed an ontological basis for Niebuhr's view of revelation as transformation. It is Niebuhr's fundamental belief that all men live and move and have their being in relation to God. In revelation the self is awakened to the real context of all its finite relations. This awakening issues in the fulfillment of created selfhood. "In religious language, the soul and God belong together; or otherwise

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. Hartt, pp. 237-42.

<sup>35</sup> Hartt, p. 243.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., pp. 233-37.

stated, I am one within myself as I encounter the One in all that acts upon me."<sup>37</sup>

It is not my contention that Hartt and Niebuhr are simply saying the same thing two different ways or from two different points of view. However, I do claim that the substance of Niebuhr's theology, insofar as it deals with the self, precludes neither the method nor the results of Hartt's analysis. Moreover, this ontological analysis of the situation of the believer gives added credibility to Niebuhr's understanding of the God-man relation and revelation.

In setting forth the implication of his ontological analysis, Hartt gives a description of revelation and its bearing on the situation of the believer. I offer it here in full for its own merit and because it expresses what I take to be Niebuhr's understanding of revelation and its context.

The implication of the foregoing is that Revelation is essentially illumination of a situation and condition antecedent, in some sense, to the act of illumination. Granted that the light thereby shed abroad is unlike any other. The power and the glory are in the full being and act of God, not alone in the "light"; or, in other words, God's doing and God's making known what he has done, are not wholly the same, even though "making known" is one of his "doings." In more specific terms we are saying that the situation of the believer is one illuminated but not wholly defined by Revelation. Through Revelation the believer grasps the situation for what it really and fully is. He comes to see not only what he is but also what he has been and what he is to be. This past is not imaginary, though its significance is grasped in and through images; and this future is not wholly visionary because, so far as it is a real future, it concerns and is related to a given structure of real potencies and relevant possibilities.

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<sup>37</sup> RS, p. 122.

Is this to deny to Revelation any constituting and reconstituting significance? Not at all. The human situation is not constituted all of a piece and all at once. It has real becoming and therefore real fluidity. And when, accordingly, light bursts upon it, great and far-reaching things happen. The field of relevant possibilities is illuminated, and a power is imparted for the unification and consolidation of the powers of the person. An imparted power, yes; but this is not the infusion of an alien substance. The power is the power to see deeply and courageously into oneself, even as we are seen by God; and it is the power to relate self to the relevant possibilities. By reason of infirmity or external circumstance this relating may lack efficacy. But the impact of Revelation is such as to charge the person with the will so to relate and express himself.<sup>38</sup>

## 2. Social Selfhood

Another area of criticism with respect to Niebuhr's anthropology has to do with the reflexive character of human selfhood and its basis in the self's social relations. Here again the lack of any explicit metaphysical discussion of selfhood has left Niebuhr vulnerable to misinterpretation. Many of Helmut Kuhn's criticisms of Niebuhr's analysis of the human conscience reflect the judgment that Niebuhr has sacrificed the individual self and its identity.<sup>39</sup> Kuhn fears that Niebuhr's "social correlationism" will "rob the self of its indefeasible substantiality."<sup>40</sup> On Kuhn's interpretation Niebuhr's position fails to account sufficiently for "a self which subsists in the absence of others."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Hartt, p. 237.

<sup>39</sup> Helmut Kuhn, "Conscience and Society," Journal of Religion, XXVI (1946), pp. 203-14. This was written in response to Niebuhr's article "The Ego-Alter Dialectic and the Conscience," Journal of Philosophy, XLII (1945), pp. 352-59. In 1946 Kuhn did not have access to RS in which many of the same ideas are more fully developed.

<sup>40</sup> Kuhn, p. 206.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 210.



Our previous discussion of the finite terminal individual is a sufficient response to this kind of criticism.

More important for our present purposes are Kuhn's attacks on the adequacy of a social, relational account of human reflexivity in general and the human conscience in particular. Claiming that reflexivity is an essential but enigmatic attribute of selfhood, Kuhn states: "Only a thing which has awareness of itself (a thing that can call itself 'I') may discover a Thou."<sup>42</sup> This suggests that self-awareness can take place in isolation, that selfhood is a possibility for atomic individuals. It also fails to take seriously the reciprocity of interpersonal relations.

It seems clear that self-awareness does involve an apprehension of myself "apprehending and being apprehended by" an other. A theory of the self which seeks to account for reflexivity must include this other at some point in the emergence of selfhood. The other must be a Thou, apprehending as well as being apprehended. Given the reciprocity of I-Thou relations, I think Niebuhr is correct in saying they are more appropriately spoken of as revelation than discovery.<sup>43</sup>

According to Kuhn, the human conscience is a free agent in society, "a constituent and not a consequent of society."<sup>44</sup> Taking this position, he argues as though Niebuhr's view denies the positive effectiveness or influence of the social self. "According to the sociological

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p. 206.

<sup>43</sup> MR, pp. 143-47.

<sup>44</sup> Kuhn, p. 210.

thesis, recognition of the moral law is submission to an authoritative self representing a society. . . . But [argues Kuhn] the individual, in turn, may repudiate any one of the societies of which he is a member."<sup>45</sup> Kuhn seems to understand the issue simply as a matter of submission or loyalty. He characterizes the self's relation to societal demands as one of "free service" and apparently he thinks Niebuhr characterizes it as "functional subservience."<sup>46</sup> In fact, it is mutual dependence and influence which characterize social relations, and it is an asset of Niebuhr's anthropology that it avoids the simple alternatives Kuhn suggests. There is a "joint authorship" in matters of conscience as well as observation, in matters of commitment as well as indifference. Perhaps it is Kuhn's rather wooden interpretation of precisely this concept that leads to many of the criticisms he raises. In any case Niebuhr's understanding of social selfhood allows for a great deal of reciprocity and interaction between the self and its social companions, though it precludes the extreme freedom Kuhn defends and the extreme subservience he attacks.

At one point in his article Kuhn discusses the need for a "transsocietal fulcrum for adjudging social claims."<sup>47</sup> Because Kuhn disallows society's part in a joint authorship of conscience he chooses reason, "a factor which exists outside and above social relationships."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., pp. 206-207.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 207.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 208.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 210.

As rational, the ego is self-transcending, that is to say, it relates itself to truths which exist independently of its own existence and of which it is in quest.

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The self is a law unto itself because as a rational self it is intrinsically related to a norm.

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The sociological theory of conscience with its failure to give reason its rightful place in moral life bids fair to plunge the adherent into that antinomianism which is brother to authoritarianism.<sup>49</sup>

Here Kuhn offers the most fundamental point of disagreement between himself and Niebuhr. The disagreement is worth noting because it illumines basic dimensions of the latter's theology.

Niebuhr also recognizes the need for something like a "transsocietal fulcrum." We recall that "thirds" in cause triads point beyond themselves, thereby affording the self some independence from its immediate relations. But for Niebuhr the point of final reference is not simply trans-societal. It is in as well as beyond the many. The self does not have its independence by standing apart from society. It moves in and through society, but this movement is in response to God. Thus the self's relation to the truth is always in terms of its own social-cultural relations. To speak only of a transsocietal fulcrum outside and above social relationships is to underplay or miss altogether the interrelations between the One and the many. These inter-relations can be maintained without denying either the transcendent or the social character of reason.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., pp. 212-13.



The independence of truths from self-existence and the idea of the self as a law unto itself are notions alien to Niebuhr's thought. Relations among social companions are fundamental and reason is not exempt from social-historical status. Self-knowledge and self-guidance are always to be had in relation to social companions. "Without obscuring the fact that the self exists as rational being in the presence of ideas, or exists as moral being in the presence of mores and laws, this view [responsibility theory] holds in the center of attention the fundamentally social character of selfhood."<sup>50</sup> This is not a failure to give reason its rightful place, nor is it a denial of the significant relation between reason and the self's ultimate context of meaning. It is the illumination of reason's actual role in the reciprocity between subject and object, the dialogue in which no self participates with complete independence.

#### B. The Nature-Cause Distinction

The primary question we must deal with in this section is whether the nature-cause distinction involves an implicit dualism. Does this distinction between two kinds of triadic relationship amount to a split in the self?

Niebuhr understands the self as a complex whole.

We act as whole though complex selves in everything that we do, or, stated negatively, . . . no one act can ever be traced back to a single motive. It is an act of a self which moves as a whole self, an act which is always

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<sup>50</sup> RS, p. 71.

highly complex, having matter, form, and ends, complex sources and complex consequences.<sup>51</sup>

The nature-cause distinction is an attempt to allow for at least one aspect of this complexity while maintaining the unity of the self.

The self participates with social companions in both kinds of triadic relationship simultaneously. The third in a nature triad is impersonal, that is non-reflective and non-self-transcendent. The third in a cause triad is personal, a center of value which points beyond itself. A single object or event can be a third in both kinds of triad at once. Given the plurality and interweaving of relations in which selves and thirds are involved, the nature-cause distinction is more appropriately applied to whole relationships than to individual participants.

Of each particular self - social companion - third triad we ask whether it is characterized by knowledge or commitment. Immediately it must be added that the characterization is not an either-or judgment. The self is not simply a knower in nature triads and a covenanter in cause triads. About this point Niebuhr is quite clear.

The responsive self, however, exists in another triadic, dialectical interaction. Traditionally we have distinguished this second situation [cause triad] from the first [nature triad] by saying that in it we exercise practical reason, while in the other we use speculative or observing reason. Useful and unavoidable as this distinction is, it tends to lead us somewhat astray by dissolving the unity of the self, somewhat as the similar, useful, but also misleading distinction

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<sup>51</sup> Niebuhr, Missionary Research Library Occasional Bulletin, XIV, p. 2.

between body and mind does. Equally serious has been the consequence that the separation has often led us to ignore the practical or ethical elements in our knowing as well as the observing, interpreting elements in our doing.<sup>52</sup>

We will consider the epistemological issue below.<sup>53</sup>

At this point I wish to concentrate on the problem of dualism traditionally dealt with in terms of the body-mind distinction. We have noted Niebuhr's lack of interest in discovering the self-in-itself, so to speak. His employment of the nature-cause distinction does not suggest that the self as participant in cause relationships somehow lies "behind" the self in nature triads. Nor does Niebuhr imply that the embodied self is a misleading cover for the "real" self within.

A criticism set forth by Robert King speaks to this issue. King claims that while Niebuhr does not "discredit the body," neither does he "grasp the full significance of embodiment for personal understanding." King goes on to make the stronger charge that Niebuhr does not avoid treating embodiment as "some kind of obstruction to genuine personal understanding."<sup>54</sup> Such criticism may have some basis in particular passages in The Meaning of Revelation, the book with which King is primarily concerned. The external-internal history distinction suggests an oversimplification which the nature-cause distinction avoids, a point we will attend to below.<sup>55</sup> However, on the basis of Niebuhr's

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<sup>52</sup>RS, pp. 82-83.

<sup>53</sup>Infra, pp. 217-27.

<sup>54</sup>Robert Harlen King, "The Concept of Personal Agency as a Theological Model" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1965), pp. 120-21.

<sup>55</sup>Infra, pp. 210-14.



writings as a whole, King's criticism cannot be sustained.

A strong argument against King's interpretation is Niebuhr's responsibility theory which depends so heavily on action and reaction. In response analysis embodiment is the clue to personal understanding. It is the interpretation of action upon the observer that determines the fitting response. The interpretation, influenced as it is by the observer's commitments, may be mistaken. But that is a problem which does not, in itself, call into question the continuity of the actor's intention and deed. On the contrary, the interpretation element in response analysis must assume that continuity.

Another clear indication that Niebuhr takes the embodied self seriously is his definition of Christ in Christ and Culture. There Niebuhr sets forth a description based on the virtues of Christ, "the excellences of character which on the one hand he exemplifies in his own life, and which on the other he communicates to his followers."<sup>56</sup> While noting the inadequacy of concepts and propositions for personal description and the limitations of any particular standpoint, Niebuhr does not hesitate to identify Jesus Christ on the basis of his deeds and teachings and the continuity between the two.

The closest Niebuhr comes to severing soul from body and advocating a full-blown dualism is in an article entitled "Towards a New Other-Worldliness" where he speaks

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<sup>56</sup> CC, pp. 14-15.

of man's need for "seasonal journeys from this world to another."<sup>57</sup> Man is a bodily being living a secular life on earth. He is concerned with such material needs as food, clothing, and shelter. But man is not only an inhabitant of the space-time world. He also lives in the realm of the soul and the spirit. This is a supernatural reality beyond the visible and tangible. The two-world distinction is important in Niebuhr's theology, and we will take up the matter in greater detail below.<sup>58</sup> Our only concern at the moment is whether man's dual environment results in a dualism of the self which sunders body and soul. It is the burden of the article we are considering to stress the interrelation of the two aspects of man's being. Man falls short of his true nature if he seeks to attend exclusively either to this world or the other, if he is simply a secularist or a spiritualist. Thus the movement stemming from Christ "assumes a two-world life on the part of man and its proper task has been the conversion of this dual existence rather than the reduction of life to one or the other."<sup>59</sup>

Mistaking Niebuhr's interpretation of man's dual existence for a dualism raises a point with respect to method which we must consider briefly. Niebuhr's characteristic approach to any subject matter is dialogical. This approach reflects his understanding of reality as so complex

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<sup>57</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, "Towards a New Other-Worldliness," Theology Today, I (1944), p. 78.

<sup>58</sup> Infra, pp. 219-22.

<sup>59</sup> Niebuhr, Theology Today, I, pp. 78-79.

that no single perspective can unveil all its dimensions, nor can one theme relate all significant issues. It is typical of Niebuhr in essays on particular problems to suggest several solutions, each partially illuminating and partially distorting, and then advance his own solution, usually with a reminder that it too has inadequacies.<sup>60</sup>

Christ and Culture is an excellent example of Niebuhr's sensitivity to the rich texture of human existence and the multiple-analysis that richness demands.

In setting forth his own views Niebuhr often seeks to accommodate complexity by employing both sides of a distinction.<sup>61</sup> Thus Niebuhr's work contains numerous dualities and polarities. Each of these pairs must be treated on its own merit, but I know of none in which one element can either absorb the other or be dropped itself without a significant loss in intelligibility. Niebuhr does not follow a dialectical movement through thesis and antithesis to synthesis. He is more interested in pointing out mutual influence and dependence than in leading the way to negation or synthesis. His dialogical method seeks to mirror the complex interrelations of reality and the forces and tensions they generate. The critical question to be asked

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<sup>60</sup> See, for example, the following articles: "The Gift of the Catholic Vision," Theology Today, IV (1948), pp. 507-21; Religion in Life, XV, pp. 106-17; Preliminary paper at Drew, 1929, pp. 1-5.

<sup>61</sup> See, for example: PC, pp. 19-27; "The Position of Theology Today," Cole Lectures, Vanderbilt University, 1961; Theology Today, I., pp. 78-87.



of each of Niebuhr's dyads is whether it represents a distinction or a dichotomy, a duality in union or a dualism.

The nature-cause distinction, so far as the individual self is concerned, qualifies as a duality in union. The self always stands in both kinds of triadic relation and a good deal of interaction is apparent. To claim that the nature-cause distinction is not an implicit dualism is not to deny a certain priority for the cause triad in Niebuhr's work. The social character of selfhood makes interpersonal relations inescapable and such relations involve at least a minimal commitment to truth among social companions. The simplest of transactions among men rests on unspoken and usually unconscious covenants. Self - social companion - nature triads are inconceivable apart from relations of commitment and loyalty. The priority of the cause relationship is not that it involves an inner or noumenal self somehow more real or more significant than an embodied or phenomenal self. Rather it is the priority of a structure ingredient in all social-cultural relations. Given Niebuhr's primary interest in persons rather than things, in social phenomena rather than natural phenomena, it is not surprising that the cause triad is a predominant feature in much of his work.

Relationships of the self - social companion - cause variety take on even greater significance in light of Niebuhr's ethical interests. The configurations and combinations of cause triads in which the self is a participant

frame the answer to the question "What shall I do?" Used in conjunction with response analysis they also raise the question "To whom am I responding?" Pushed far enough, this question becomes a theological issue. Responsibility theory can serve as an instrument of analysis for both the ethicist and the theologian because it turns on the triadic structure ingredient in all social relations, regardless of the third in question. This is just another way of pointing to the fact that faith in God displays the same triadic structure manifest in the self's commitment to family or nation. This accounts for the predominance of the cause relationship in Niebuhr's theological discussions.

My purpose in reviewing the priority of the cause triad in Niebuhr's anthropology, ethics, and theology is to make the point that this priority involves absolutely no denial or disparagement of the embodied self in its inescapable relations with natural objects and other embodied selves. There is no hidden dualism in Niebuhr's nature-cause distinction.

The claim that the self-- social companion - cause triad is a structure manifest in all interpersonal relations, coupled with the claim that the faith relation has such a structure, raises a point of criticism in Niebuhr's position which we will attend to briefly in concluding this section. It must be asked whether Niebuhr is correct in his assertion that all men have faith that life is worth living.

The claim that every self participates in at least one cause triad which gives meaning to his life is difficult to evaluate. The primitive assurance that life is meaningful is often, perhaps almost always, unconscious. This faith may only be in evidence in crisis situations, and even then it may not be reflected upon or articulated. Nonetheless, what evidence there is seems to support Niebuhr's claim. The struggle to live in the face of overwhelming odds and the willingness to die that others might live or live under particular conditions are phenomena which seem to counter a denial of Niebuhr's view. Nor is it decisive against Niebuhr's position to cite cases where people act with honesty and courage while denying any hope that their deeds will endure or even be noticed. Such people obviously find their chosen courses of action more meaningful than others however limited the extent of that meaning. Perhaps suicide is finally the strongest argument contrary to Niebuhr's view at this point, and even suicide is sometimes undertaken in a distorted affirmation of the meaningfulness of life.

While I will admit that the universality of faith as confidence in life's meaning or worth is a debatable question, I seriously doubt whether conclusive evidence could ever be brought forth on either side. In any case, such a debate is beyond the scope of this essay. I choose to grant Niebuhr his fundamental assumption, recognizing that others may disagree at this very basic level. Such



disagreement would preclude the understanding and acceptance of much of his theology. Niebuhr's assumption of the lack of faith neutrality is highly significant in his view of the God-man relationship and interpersonal relations.

### C. Objective Relativism and Theological Method

The three parts that comprise this section are closely related. Each could serve as the starting point for a discussion of the others. Likewise in each of these general problem areas we confront specific issues of substance as well as method.

#### 1. Relativism

Niebuhr's understanding of relativism is an important critical consideration in discussing his theology as a whole and his concept of revelation in particular. The mere frequency with which the word "relativism" appears in Niebuhr's writing may lead to some confusion. However, a careful analysis discloses two general meanings.<sup>62</sup> One meaning is relational. The self, for instance, is related to other finite beings and to God. These relations in being constitute the basis of its needs and values. The other general use of relativism refers to the limitations imposed on human knowledge by psychological, socio-historical, and religious circumstances. As was pointed out in chapter two of this essay, the phrase "objective relativism" can carry either of these two meanings. It can refer to the relation

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<sup>62</sup>Hans W. Frei, "The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr," FE, pp. 87-88.

of value to objective beings or it can make the claim that partial knowledge is nonetheless knowledge of the real. When the object in question is God, "objective relativism" is synonymous with "religious realism."

Much of the confusion in this matter, and I think the clue to its alleviation, lies in the fact that the two general meanings of relativism are connected. Relational selfhood is selfhood in the midst of particular relations. The parties to these relations define by their actual being and becoming individual needs and the resources available to meet these needs. Likewise the perspectives open to selves in specific relations define the boundaries of knowledge. The "relational" and "limitation" meanings of relativism point out two dimensions of the same whole. A man's particular relation to God may be analyzed in terms of either dimension. My relation to God in being, like my relation to finite beings, has significant consequences for my actual needs and their fulfillment. So too, my knowledge of God is under the limitation of my humanity, my specific standpoint in history, and the character of my "cause" relations. Objective relativism in being and in knowledge are finally inseparable, and there is a clear sense in which the latter is a function of the former.

Paul Ramsey fails to give adequate recognition to this connection between the two general meanings of relativism in his article entitled "The Transformation of Ethics."<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Paul Ramsey, "The Transformation of Ethics," FE, pp. 140-72.

After an excellent discussion of the transformation or conversion motif in Niebuhr's thought, Ramsey attacks relativism in its "limitation" meaning as a mistaken notion and a liability in ethics. We will consider his views in order to show that Niebuhr's use of "relativism" involves neither of these things.

Ramsey opens the critical section of his essay with an interpretation of both the "objective" and the "relative" sides of Niebuhr's objective relativism. He then suggests the phrases "relational objectivism" and "perspectival objectivism," rough equivalents for what we have been calling the "relational" and the "limitation" meanings of relativism.<sup>64</sup> This is a good suggestion and one that is consistent with Niebuhr's thought.

Ramsey's first difficulty with Niebuhr's understanding of relativism as limitation is actually twofold. He argues that Niebuhr himself fails to make a case for relativism, and that the theory is groundless. Though Ramsey does not define what he himself means by relativism, it is clear that he is attacking skeptical relativism. The strange thing is that he offers a sound interpretation of Niebuhr's position which counters his own criticism.

If only an act of faith makes the difference between this position [Niebuhr's] and skeptical relativism, then one might be forced to conclude that Niebuhr's objective relativism amounts to no more than skeptical relativism plus Hume's flair for playing the game of backgammon despite the inability of reason to justify the beliefs he invariably held while doing so.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 156.



But in interpreting Niebuhr one can lean just as far in the other direction, in the direction of objectivism. . . . The faith Niebuhr mentions is . . . the faith that, in its views of the universal, the mind knows the real world. The belief of his "belief-ful realism" is actually the belief of a "critical realist." Amid relative historical perspectives, something of the universal is really grasped by reason.<sup>65</sup>

Ramsey goes on to point out that Niebuhr's notion of dialogue presupposes that "each participant grasps something of the universal from his peculiar perspective and contributes this to, as well as receives correction from, the community of knowing minds."<sup>66</sup> He claims that there is good reason for denying that "relativism" adequately expresses what Niebuhr means to say. "Is this not better called a relational or perspectival objectivism than any sort of relativism?"<sup>67</sup>

All this would seem to suggest that Niebuhr fails to make a case for skeptical relativism simply because that is not the view he is upholding. The issue then is a semantic one, and it is finally incidental whether skeptical relativism is a groundless theory since neither Niebuhr nor Ramsey is proposing it. However, in the face of Ramsey's assertions it is worth pointing out a few things concerning the kind of relativism Niebuhr is talking about, regardless of its proper label.

The limitation in question here is partial. The self who employs his historical-cultural reason is also an experiencing participant in the actual state of affairs.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 155.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 156.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

Not only other reasoners but reality itself corrects our interpretations and modifies our categories and images. Niebuhr is certainly not an advocate of the view that reason is "wholly determined by the historical seasons."<sup>68</sup>

Every age is in a real sense the creator of its own past. Of course the past produced it. The faiths and facts, the institutions and laws, the economic life of yesterday have determined what today shall be. But the determination is not complete; the new day is also self-creative. . . . Reformations and revolutions create the past out of which they create themselves; and they do so by making a judicious selection from their heritage. . . . Only by such recreation of the past can the needs of the new day be met and only so can old ideals be made effective.<sup>69</sup>

We should also note it is not the case that reason "in knowing its historical limits has already in some sense transcended those limits," if by transcend Ramsey means that reason frees itself of limitation.<sup>70</sup> We can see the relativism of previous thinkers simply by comparing their differing views and formulations. Is it so difficult then to suppose the partiality of our own analyses? This can be done without denying that our partial views are views of the real. We need not "break out" from among the categories of historical reason in order to "lay hold on the real."<sup>71</sup>

Finally we should take note of an article in which Niebuhr discusses the sort of skeptical relativism Ramsey falsely ascribes to him.<sup>72</sup> Such relativism in the moral

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 157.

<sup>69</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Relativities of Religion" (unpublished essay, date unknown), p. 1.

<sup>70</sup> Ramsey, p. 157.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>72</sup> Niebuhr, Preliminary paper at Drew, 1929.

field is the complement and antithesis of ethical absolutism.

Its value lies in its evident truth; its error in its equally evident failure to comprehend the whole truth - a statement which with equal right may be made of absolutist ethics also. Relativism is really not so much a theory as a report of experience.<sup>73</sup>

Ramsey's second major criticism of Niebuhr's relativism in its epistemological or limiting sense is that it somehow imperils the ethical enterprise. Ramsey takes exception to elements of the following passage in Niebuhr's essay entitled "The Center of Value":

The value-theory of monotheistic theology is enabled to proceed to the construction of many relative value systems, each of them tentative, experimental, objective, as it considers the interaction of being on beings, now from the point of view of man, now from the point of view of society, now from the point of view of life. But it is restrained from erecting any one of these into an absolute, or even from ordering it above the others, as when the human-centered value system is regarded as superior to a life-centered value system. A monotheistically centered value theory is not only compatible with such objective relativism in value analysis but requires it in view of its fundamental dogma that none is absolute save God and that the absolutizing of anything finite is ruinous to the finite itself.<sup>74</sup>

Ramsey sees no difficulty in having more than one absolute. "To have 'an absolute' in value-theory is not necessarily to substitute it idolatrously for the Absolute."<sup>75</sup> Such a claim seems to neglect the dependence of value on relations in being. Radical monotheism is not simply

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>74</sup> Ramsey, p. 158, quoted from H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Center of Value," Moral Principles of Action: Man's Ethical Imperative, ed. R. N. Anshen (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1952), pp. 162-75. This article appears with some revision in RM, pp. 100-113. The passage under consideration here undergoes no substantive change.

<sup>75</sup> Ramsey, p. 158.



"a serious effort to view morality in the light of God."<sup>76</sup>

It makes claims about the Absolute which clearly deny the presence of other absolutes in being or value. The last phrase of the lengthy quotation above is significant. Such absolutizing is ruinous because it ignores the vital relation to the Infinite in being and value, and it excludes certain possibilities for relations among the finite.

I think Ramsey is correct in opposing what he takes to be Niebuhr's opposition to all ordering of relative value systems. Ramsey points out that Niebuhr himself is involved in such ordering. Using Christ and Culture as a test case, we see that Niebuhr "cannot refrain from discriminating the flanks from the center of the line in recounting Christ's engagement with culture."<sup>77</sup> I would contend, however, that Niebuhr's position does not require him to refrain from such discrimination. The statement about ordering in the quotation we are discussing is not a call for indifference to relative distinctions in value. It is rather a safeguard against the acceptance of such distinctions as universally and permanently valid.

To discern the relativity of our interpretation is not to rob our gospel of its power. The relative may have an absolute claim on us without having an absolute claim on all men everywhere. We not only may, but must take it to our heart as our categorical imperative, our highest and our best. And if we have been as true as we could be to the spirit of the author of our ideal and to the need of our own souls, we have a right to the

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 165.

faith that our point of view has not betrayed its object completely. We may be confident that what we have seen darkly is really there and that new points of view will not destroy but will fulfill the promise of our best insights and highest aspirations.<sup>78</sup>

Ramsey sees no inconsistency in holding at once to radical monotheism and the conversionist principle on the one hand and universally permanent and valid ethical principles on the other. As an example of the latter Ramsey states that "men and women have the right to the free exercise of their sexual powers."<sup>79</sup> While such a principle is certainly worthy of tentative approval and merits strong support in the vast majority of cases, I see no reason to grant it universal and permanent validity. Ramsey's position assumes a perspective on human experience and the history of man which is quite beyond any single self or community of selves. The claim for universal permanence at the level Ramsey suggests is a restriction on transformation and a denial of process. The permanent revolution Niebuhr writes about is not simply a social movement among men. God is a factor in this revolution. The universal and permanent validity sought by Christian ethics is to be found only in the ultimate context of the God-man relationship as it is represented in the symbolic form Jesus Christ.

We might also ask what is the practical gain in substituting universal and permanent validity for the tentativeness of the views Niebuhr advances? Is there a

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<sup>78</sup> Niebuhr, "The Relativities of Religion," p. 3.

<sup>79</sup> Ramsey, p. 166.

significant difference between saying that the human right to the free exercise of sexual powers is universally and permanently valid and saying that to the best of our present and admittedly partial knowledge such free exercise is a human right? If there is a difference it would seem to be that the former is more likely than the latter to lead to defensiveness and a hardening against transformation. There is no reason to argue with Ramsey's preference for the transformation of "relationally objective norms" rather than "relativism," providing that "norm" is not just another way of saying universally and permanently valid.

In concluding this discussion of relativism I think it is fair to say that Niebuhr's terminology and varying usage is confusing. We have already noted Niebuhr's own awareness of this problem.<sup>80</sup> However, it is equally fair to say that the two general meanings of relativism, combined in the phrase "objective relativism," are consistent with one another. The "limitation" sense of relativism need not undermine affirmations made in accordance with the "relational" sense.

It [Christianity] has the right to claim that its experience of the will of God is not only obligatory in form but also in content; that its claim to absoluteness does not rest only upon the character of human experience but also on the character of reality; that goodness does not depend upon human judgment but on the pattern of existence, or the will of God.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Supra, p. 76, n. 17.

<sup>81</sup> Niebuhr, Preliminary paper at Drew, 1929, p. 4.



## 2. External and Internal History

Closely associated with relativism and rooted with it in finite relational selfhood is Niebuhr's distinction between external and internal history. This distinction manifests the importance of one's particular point of view for understanding the meaning and significance of an event. Perspectives on an event vary according to the relational context in which the self stands.

In his book entitled The Historian and the Believer Van A. Harvey offers several helpful criticisms of Niebuhr's distinction between external and internal history.<sup>82</sup> Harvey contends that though this distinction between perspectives represents a valid insight it is set forth too simply in The Meaning of Revelation.<sup>83</sup> Among the ambiguities that result is an equivocation with respect to the meaning of external history. The term is used to refer to disinterested history, all history that is not Christian internal history (including, therefore, alien internal histories), and the facts which are interpreted by internal history.<sup>84</sup> This equivocation confuses attempts to indicate the relation between the two kinds of history, and it hinders efforts to deal with the possibility of transcending any one

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<sup>82</sup> Van A. Harvey, The Historian and the Believer (New York: Macmillan, 1966), pp. 234-42.

<sup>83</sup> See MR, pp. 43-90, for the problematic material.

<sup>84</sup> Harvey, pp. 238-39. In the first of the three meanings "disinterested" is used to indicate lack of interest so far as one's own destiny is concerned. Cf. MR, p. 145.

perspective.<sup>85</sup> Harvey is correct in calling into question the meaning of external history. As the term stands in The Meaning of Revelation it presents the difficulties he mentions. However, I believe Niebuhr's work as a whole contains adequate resources to avoid these difficulties while preserving the basic insight. An observation of Harvey's provides the criteria for an expanded interpretation of the external-internal distinction.

The division of history into internal and external history obscures the fact that there are not just two possible perspectives on any given event or constellation of events but a plurality of them. There is a multiplicity of possible inner histories just as there are a number of possible external histories. . . . The problem is really one of ascertaining the kind and level of assertions that occur in differing perspectives and, in particular cases, discovering the extent to which they are incompatible and mutually exclusive.<sup>86</sup>

As was pointed out in chapter ii, the external-internal distinction can be understood as a variation on the nature-cause distinction. The fundamental differences between perspectives can be dealt with in terms of the triadic relationships in which they are rooted. A single self exists simultaneously in numerous triads of both varieties, and as illustrated in the Civil War example, the same self, social companions, and third can be related now in a nature triad, now in a cause triad. The account given of an event which stands as a third in a self - social companion - nature triad is external history. As the third in a self -

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<sup>85</sup> See Frei, "Niebuhr's Theological Background," pp. 30-31, for a related criticism. Frei calls attention to an apparent discrepancy between the methodological discussion of historical thought set forth in MR and Niebuhr's own historical method in KGA, PC, and CC.

<sup>86</sup> Harvey, pp. 239-40.

social companion - cause relationship an event is reflective and representative and the account given of it is internal history.

Interpreting the external - internal distinction in terms of triadic relationships allows for the variety and complexity of perspectives Harvey calls to our attention and Niebuhr's work generally recognizes. This interpretation also clarifies the possibility of movement from one perspective to another. Harvey is correct in stating that Niebuhr's own theory "presupposes the ability to transcend one's own perspective."<sup>87</sup> In principle at least, there is no reason to deny the self access to any finite external perspectives. Movement among internal perspectives is a built-in feature of cause triads wherein representative thirds direct the self into new social contexts. Such movement is from one level to another and it is internally consistent, but this does not preclude movement among differing perspectives at the same level. However, an important qualification needs to be added at this point. Movement among cause triads and thus also among internal perspectives becomes increasingly difficult as the self approaches its ultimate context of trust and loyalty. This qualification also applies to movement from external to internal perspectives when ultimate cause relations are at stake. Harvey's claim that perspectives are field-encompassing and that external and internal histories each contain elements of

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 239.



the other is consistent with Niebuhr's own position providing we remember that at the level of religious faith confidence in and devotion to a center of value and a cause dominate all other elements.<sup>88</sup> It is a standpoint in this kind of faith relationship which issues in the internal history Niebuhr distinguishes so sharply from external history in The Meaning of Revelation. "Only a decision of the self, a leap of faith, a metanoia or revolution of the mind can lead from observation to participation and from observed to lived history."<sup>89</sup> Movement to new internal perspectives at this level involves transforming power.

Returning to the problem of the three meanings of external history as set forth in The Meaning of Revelation, how shall we interpret them in light of the nature-cause distinction? Disinterested history is history arising from nature triads in which cause or faith relations have no direct influence on the context of the analysis. History that is not Christian internal history can originate in either nature or cause triads. This no longer presents a difficulty since there is greater freedom of movement among such triads and their perspectives.<sup>90</sup> Finally there are the facts which internal history interprets. I think it is

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 241.

<sup>89</sup> MR., p. 83.

<sup>90</sup> Our expanded interpretation of the external-internal distinction allows for the theological appropriation of non-theological categories, a practice in Niebuhr's historical writings which Frei finds contrary to the methodological description in MR. Supra, p. 211, n. 85.

misleading to say that these facts are external history or that "external history is the medium in which internal history exists and comes to life."<sup>91</sup> In terms of our expanded interpretation, it would be misleading to say that nature triads are the media in which cause triads exist. Niebuhr is more consistent with his overall position when he states that "the internal life does not exist without external embodiment," or that "we can have no continuing inner history through which to point without embodiment."<sup>92</sup>

The external-internal distinction is a distinction between two types of perspective each of which has its basis in relational being. Embodiment or availability to all observers is not the special province of the external perspective. We could put this in terms of the nature-cause distinction and say that the meaning or significance of "facts," as yet uninterpreted "thirds," is a problem in both types of triad. In nature triads the personal commitments of the self and social companions are not directly involved, but this is not to say that the thirds in question have no meaning or significance. The natural scientist no less than the theologian attends to the meaning of his objects of study, their significance as illustrations or contradictions of "laws" or hypotheses under consideration.

In this connection several comments about reason and faith are in order. Reason is employed in the interpretation of meaning and significance in both triads.

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<sup>91</sup> MR, p. 90.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., pp. 89-90.

Faith is indirectly involved in both triads. It is present as the primitive confidence in the independent reality of the partially known or the fundamental assurance that life is worth living. Faith is also present as a structure of trusts and loyalties in which every social self participates. Thus Niebuhr can write about the conflict among the forms of faith in science, education, and politics as well as religion. In all triadic relations reason is under the indirect influence of faith. However, in cause triads the influence is also direct. In such relations the self is interpreting the objects of trust and loyalty, objects which are personally reflective, bearing on the self's own commitments and destiny. These same objects or their representative symbols can be interpreted as thirds in nature triads and this does not rob them of all significance. It simply means that whatever meaning they have no longer bears directly on the faith of the interpreting selves.

What is really involved in the distinction between external and internal history is a distinction between two general types of interest in historical events. The kinds of meaning and significance these events have vary according to the kinds of relationships in which they are interpreted. Insofar as reason employs a different type of image in each of the two triadic relationships we are reminded of the Kantian distinction between the theoretical and practical employment of pure reason.<sup>93</sup> However, it is

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., pp. viii, 67, 76.



difficult to say how far this similarity can be pushed. Though Niebuhr clearly rests his external-internal distinction in the perspective of the interpreting subject so far as the kinds of rational images employed are concerned, he just as clearly tests the adequacy of these images by their fruitfulness in the world of relational beings and events. In other words, there is a real reciprocity between internal interpretations and the same events which are given external interpretations. The cause triad is no less a structure of "objective" relations than the nature triad.

The reciprocity between interpretations from the perspective of cause relations and embodied or readily observable events is most apparent in the divisiveness and frustration which ~~meet~~ inadequate interpretations arising out of faith in exclusive gods. Adjudication among faith perspectives takes place in the complex relational interaction which characterizes social selfhood. This is why crisis or boundary situations are of particular interest to theologians. Such situations provide telling tests for the self's internal history. Self-transcendence and the movement to a different faith triad often follow despair at the failure of a previous perspective to meet new circumstances.

In summary it can be said that the nature-cause distinction serves to illumine the interrelations of reason and faith as well as those of external and internal history. In the case of the latter, we have seen that despite a somewhat oversimplified statement of the external-internal

distinction in The Meaning of Revelation, perhaps even a misleading choice of labels, Niebuhr intends neither a dualism nor a secure haven for confessional interpretations. What we have instead is a duality in union, and the union is not in external history or in triadic relationships of the nature variety.<sup>94</sup> Rather it is in selves, social companions, and events which always stand at once in both nature and cause relationships and are therefore participants in both external and internal histories.

### 3. Dualism and anthropomorphism

The central issue in Hans Frei's discussion of Niebuhr's theological method is the "inevitable tension between objectivity and relational thinking."<sup>95</sup> On the one hand Niebuhr wants to maintain God's "objectivity," that is to say his irreducible selfhood, his untranscendable otherness, and especially his uniqueness. Without an explicit doctrine of analogy this effort may force Niebuhr into "complete epistemological dualism," a tendency manifest most sharply in his failure to set forth a positive description of conversion.<sup>96</sup> On the other hand Niebuhr's commitment to

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>95</sup> Frei, "The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr," p. 85. Hereafter all references to Frei designate this essay.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., pp. 83-84. It should be noted that the "epistemological dualism" in question here is the dualism between knowledge of other selves and knowledge of God. This issue is to be distinguished from the problem of dualism with respect to knowledge and the objects of knowledge. While the latter problem is related to the former, it is not the matter under discussion here.

a relational method in theology may result in the "reduction of the notion of God's selfhood to anthropomorphism."<sup>97</sup> In his avoidance of metaphysics and ontology, "Niebuhr vacillates between a dualism which can give no specific content except 'confrontation' to the concept of personhood and a relationalism that makes the content of the idea anthropomorphic."<sup>98</sup> Though Frei takes this vacillation to be a serious problem in Niebuhr's theology, he does not fail to point out instances in which Niebuhr has avoided the pitfalls of alternative theological methods. Since Frei's essay is rich in insight and critical commentary, it will be our partner in dialogue for much of what follows.

Frei characterizes Niebuhr's thought as "relational objectivity,"<sup>99</sup> This is an appropriate phrase for the variety of formal and substantive issues we have been discussing under the rubric "objective relativism." However, Frei's understanding of the method it describes is somewhat restrictive. Though there may be a tension between objectivity and relational thought, on the whole Niebuhr's theology avoids the pitfalls of epistemological dualism and anthropomorphism.

By epistemological dualism Frei means the discontinuity between our knowledge of other selves and our knowledge of God. This dualism is implied in the absence of a doctrine of analogy. It results in a lack of content in our knowledge of God. Epistemological dualism is a consequence of God's

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 75.



uniqueness, and thus it is symptomatic of a more profound dualism. We will attend to the latter problem first, asking whether Niebuhr's theology is dualistic in the sense that its preservation of God's transcendence involves a sharp dichotomy between the divine and the human.

We will do well to begin with what Frei correctly takes to be "one of Niebuhr's most pessimistic theological essays in which the tendency toward dualism is less relieved by the opposite tendency than in most of his other writings."<sup>100</sup> "Towards a New Other-Worldliness" distinguishes between the earth or space-time world of bodily beings and an other world, the transcendent realm of the spirit. We recall from a previous discussion that man inhabits both worlds and that his nature is truncated if he neglects either one.<sup>101</sup> Now we must attempt to understand in what way, if any, the two worlds are related. First, they are related in need, or as Niebuhr puts the matter, "earth is not enough."<sup>102</sup> The principles on which secular life is founded come from beyond the secular realm. The disinterestedness necessary for sound social leadership is anchored in other-worldly interest. The secular life is insufficient for man as a source of new ideas and as a satisfaction of human hunger.

How are these needs fulfilled? Is there no connection, no bridge between the two worlds? If the satisfaction of the earth's ultimate yearning is wholly transcendent, then

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 85, n. 51.

<sup>101</sup> Supra, p. 195-96.

<sup>102</sup> Niebuhr, Theology Today, I, p. 81.

it would seem that Niebuhr is advocating a dualism. "Towards a New Other-Worldliness" does not answer our question decisively. Niebuhr seems to associate the kingdom of God entirely with the other world and he states that "any true other-worldly movement must come and will come from the other world itself."<sup>103</sup> But he also writes of one God who redeems life lived in two worlds, a God who is partially visible in this world as the immanent Spirit. This God is a "living Creator and Redeemer who enters into the world, who not only draws men to himself by the attraction of ideal being but enters compulsively into them."<sup>104</sup> What Niebuhr leaves doubtful in this essay is made clear in the light of his theological writings as a whole.

"Christian faith loses much of its dynamic when it is separated from hope, or when the hope is understood in such distant terms that it does not impinge on present existence."<sup>105</sup> Niebuhr's hope is in a God that is immanent as well as transcendent. The other world can focus life in this world because it is itself ingredient in this world. Man's perfection as a creature, writes Niebuhr, "is not a far-off achievement, a more or less remote possibility which future generations may realize after infinite effort; it is rather the underlying datum of life."<sup>106</sup> Niebuhr cites as the Christian prescription for the moral malaise

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>105</sup> Niebuhr, "The Position of Theology Today, p. 8.

<sup>106</sup> Niebuhr, Journal of Religion, XV, p. 273.

of our time these words of Jesus Christ: "Repent and have confidence that the kingdom of God is at hand."<sup>107</sup> The kingdom of God is an ordering and sustaining process underlying our life and we are to have confidence that the will of the orderer is for good.<sup>108</sup>

Niebuhr's two worlds are not opposite sides of a dualism but members of a duality in union.<sup>109</sup> Interaction rather than separation marks man's relation to God. Two-worldliness underlies Niebuhr's transformation and conversionist motifs. While there is much in Niebuhr's description of the dualist position in Christ and Culture which reminds us of the author, there can be no doubt that he is a conversionist. All three of the convictions by which he distinguishes the conversionist's attitude toward culture from that of the dualist are manifest in his own theology.<sup>110</sup>

The world is never without God's creative ordering and this has its bearing on redeemed and unredeemed alike as the destruction of defensiveness and the divisiveness of conflicting faiths make clear. The fall is a reversal of creation, a corruption or perversion which is remedied not by another creation but by the radical transformation unleashed by reconciliation. Finally the conversionist holds that "to God all things are possible in a history that is

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<sup>107</sup> Niebuhr, "Religion and the Ethical Crisis of Our Time," p. 13.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>109</sup> See supra, pp. 196-98, with respect to Niebuhr's dialogical approach.

<sup>110</sup> CC, pp. 191-96.



fundamentally not a course of merely human events but always a dramatic interaction between God and men."<sup>111</sup>

The fundamental dialectic of Christianity which directs life to a God who loves the world and requires his followers to return to the world, the double movement manifest in Jesus Christ as Son of God, and universal responsibility before the One that is in as well as beyond the many all have their basis in a two-worldliness that is more properly called a duality in union than a dualism. But this does not necessarily settle the question of dualism at the epistemological level. Is our knowledge of God really only an acknowledgment, a "tenuous sort of inferential judgment" from the apprehension of ourselves as known, believed in, and valued?<sup>112</sup>

There are numerous passages in Niebuhr's work which suggest an affirmative response. Man must be reconciled to the One on whom he is absolutely dependent, the Inscrutable Power, "the Mystery behind the mystery of human existence."<sup>113</sup> The first certainty man has in revelation must be stated as, "I am being thought, therefore I am." or, "I am being believed in, therefore I believe."<sup>114</sup> There is an undeniable element of acknowledgment in man's I-Thou encounter with God. But is that the only element? Is God so unique, is the character of his relation with man so unusual, that we can only point dumbly in his "direction," lacking even analogies

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 194.

<sup>113</sup> PC, p. 36.

<sup>112</sup> Frei, pp. 83-84.

<sup>114</sup> MR, p. 140.

for our knowledge of God? I think the resources available in Niebuhr's theology as a whole justify a negative response to these queries.

"Acknowledgment" is itself a concept deriving from the I-Thou model appropriate in interpersonal relations. We have seen that Niebuhr's account of the reflexive character of selfhood begins with the self's acknowledgment that it is known by another knower. The uniqueness of the God-man relationship is not that the human subject is first known by God but that it is fully known, known by one "who knows the final secrets of the heart."<sup>115</sup> Acknowledgment is the beginning of knowledge in interpersonal relations. "This knowledge does not run from a subject to an object but from the other to the self and back again. We cannot know here save as we are known."<sup>116</sup> So too man's knowledge of God has its beginning in acknowledgment, in disclosure rather than discovery.

The cause triad provides another analogy for our knowledge of God. Self and social companions are related to God and to one another in mutual bonds of trust and loyalty. The characteristic features of "thirds" in cause triads help us understand in what sense God is unique. He too is personal in the reflective sense, but unlike all other thirds his evaluation extends to all our relations. He does not simply judge our patriotism or our conjugal

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 145.

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fidelity. "Revelation means that we find ourselves to be valued rather than valuing and that all our values are transvaluated by the activity of a universal valuer."<sup>117</sup>

God is also representative like other thirds, but his reference is not transcendent. As the principle of being God represents the entire realm of being. Standing in the universal triad of faith a self is bound in loyalty to "a universal other and a universal community, which that other both represents and makes his cause."<sup>118</sup> God is the One in and beyond the many, the principle of being in which all beings are participants. Thus the acknowledgment of this third is the beginning not the end of our knowledge of God.

My contention is that Niebuhr's understanding of revelation does not involve an epistemological dualism. Such a charge can only be sustained by abstracting the element of existential acknowledgment in man's relation to God and equating it with revelation. This would be to limit Niebuhr's definition of revelation to transforming power, thus denying its relevance as an organizing principle. While Niebuhr clearly grants priority to the "immediate worth" or "intrinsic verity" of revelation, he just as clearly maintains its "instrumental value" or its "ability to guide men to many other truths."<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>118</sup> RS, p. 87.

<sup>119</sup> MR, p. 139.



The priority of transforming power in revelation has its basis in the priority of cause relationships. Man always stands in relations of trust and loyalty which influence, at least indirectly, his interpretations of reality. At the level of religious faith a change in thirds must precede a new interpretation. Yet it is also true that a new interpretation accompanies such a change. It is somewhat misleading to say that Niebuhr's theological method is based on the knowledge of an occasion the uniqueness of which cannot be known apart from a "distinctly nontheoretical" apprehension.<sup>120</sup> To deny the extremely personal immediacy of the revelatory confrontation with God, the profound recognition that God the enemy is Friend, would of course falsify Niebuhr's view of revelation. Yet it seems equally inaccurate to limit Niebuhr's view to such immediacy. The assurance that the Determiner of Destiny is trustworthy, like the assurance which accompanies all our ultimate convictions, "grows out of immediate perception plus social corroboration and out of neither one of these alone."<sup>121</sup> Rational assessment is as appropriate in the universal triad of faith as it is in lesser cause triads.

Frei finds the tendency to dualism most evident in Niebuhr's description of conversion.

It is in the understanding of the abruptness of God's entry into our faith that the dualistic tendencies we have observed in Niebuhr become most clearly evident. There is no possible description of the way of this

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<sup>120</sup> Frei, p. 92.

<sup>121</sup> MR, p. 141.

ingression into our history. He is simply there, the great surd, and the fact that faith in God's faithfulness is created through Christ's sufferings allows only our confession, but no real explication.<sup>122</sup>

It is certainly true that Niebuhr offers little in the way of explication as to how faith in God's faithfulness is created through the sufferings of Christ. Most of his discussions of the matter leave the distinct impression that we can only confess that where there is such faith there is Jesus Christ.<sup>123</sup> Trust in God's trustworthiness is a conviction reason cannot give itself. If that were not the case reason would be the foundation of faith; Niebuhr holds the contrary view. In this sense Jesus Christ is a surd. We cannot explicate how it is that he sufficiently jars the attachment of our faith that we can entertain a new understanding of our existence. But the question is whether this involves Niebuhr in dualism. Is God's entry so abrupt? Does Niebuhr's understanding of the divine ingression amount to a dualism?

The closest Niebuhr comes to explicating how conversion is wrought among us through Jesus Christ is the statement that "reality maintains and makes powerful such life as this."<sup>124</sup> This would seem to suggest that the ingredients for conversion are present to man prior to his conversion. Another statement supports this view.

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<sup>122</sup>Frei, p. 93.

<sup>123</sup>See, for example: RM, pp. 124-25; Niebuhr, Christian Century, LXXVII, p. 249.

<sup>124</sup>RS, p. 177.

This faith has been introduced into our history, into our culture, our church, our human community, through this person and this event. Now that it has been called forth in us through him we see that it was always there, that without it we should never have lived at all, that faithfulness is the moral reason in all things.<sup>125</sup>

What Jesus Christ does in revelation is reconcile not replace. The gift of a new faith comes from beyond man, but not beyond the God-man relation. That relation is inescapable. Man turns his fundamental situation into one of conflict. Jesus Christ enters that situation and becomes a victim and a mediator.<sup>126</sup>

It is clear at this point that the charge of dualism calls into question the conversionist or transformation theme so important in Niebuhr's theology. Our discussion of Niebuhr's two-worldliness raised the same issue. Again we can only appeal to the vast majority of Niebuhr's work and say that it represents an understanding of God as man's ultimate source, ground, and end, the "last environment to which he is related in all his relations."<sup>127</sup> Prior to conversion this environment is present in apparent hostility. Thus Jesus Christ can only be a point, however crucial, in a conversation which is already underway when man acknowledges the Slayer of the gods as God.

According to Frei, the inevitable tension between objectivity and relational thinking confronts Niebuhr with a second dilemma, "the reduction of the notion of God's

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<sup>125</sup> CC, p. 255.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>127</sup> RS, p. 155.



selfhood to anthropomorphism."<sup>128</sup> If there is a common factor in the numerous and varied problems and pseudo-problems to which the term "anthropomorphism" refers, it is infringement upon the objectivity of God. One such infringement is the limitation of God to what man can know about him. This is not Frei's criticism, nor could it be the charge of any but the most superficial readers of Niebuhr's work.

Another kind of limitation is placed on God when his meaning can only be recognized in certain prescribed relations with man. This seems to be at least one sort of anthropomorphism which Frei finds in Niebuhr's theology.

Is it not dangerous to insist that revelation means a necessarily personal self-disclosure of the divine person - just because this is the necessity of our existential situation? In that case our situation prescribes the nature of revelation, and the meaning of the divine or objective "term" is not only realized in but completely bound to the relation.<sup>129</sup>

First it must be granted that Niebuhr does allow the situation of the finite relational self to prescribe the nature of revelation within certain limits. The psychological, historical, and religious relativism that restricts all human understanding is not miraculously withdrawn in the case of revelation.

It must also be granted that the meaning of the divine or objective term is realized in revelation which involves an existential God-man encounter. This is, however, only one aspect of revelation, the aspect we have associated

<sup>128</sup> Frei, p. 84.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

with transforming power. Furthermore, the existential or personal character of this encounter may be subject to a broader interpretation than the one Frei assumes. The reflective and representative character of personal thirds in cause triads and the appropriateness of such categories for analysis of the triad of faith qualifies the uniqueness of the revelatory situation.<sup>130</sup> In any case, revelation does have an existential element and the need for such an element is prescribed by the human situation, a situation in which faith in life's worth has been attached to the gods rather than God.

The meaning of the objective term is not completely bound to the existential or personal God-man encounter. This is only one part of revelation, and revelation itself is but the beginning of our understanding of that meaning which we represent in the term "God." The transforming power of revelation empowers a "radical reconstruction of our natural knowledge about deity."<sup>131</sup> The faith that is given in the existential realization that the Lord of heaven and earth is Father is a qualifying element in all our interpretations. We are compelled to seek the action of God in all the actions upon us.

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<sup>130</sup> We observed the same increased subtlety of distinction and flexibility of interpretation in our discussion of external and internal history, *supra*, pp. 210-217. It should be noted again that Frei's essay was written before the publication of a good deal of the material upon which my interpretation is based. The most noteworthy item in this regard is *RS*.

<sup>131</sup> *MR*, p. 182.

While the meaning of God is not completely bound to the existential relation, it is dependent upon the self's participation in the universal triad of faith. Trust in any of the exclusive gods distorts our understanding of the One beyond the many. We must ask if this feature of Niebuhr's relational method justifies a somewhat different version of the anthropomorphism charge. "If one cannot abstract from the divine-human relationship . . . then every attempt to speak of God as 'living,' in the sense that he holds the initiative and has the freedom to grant or to withhold himself in regard to any relationship, is itself a tissue of abstractions."<sup>132</sup> There is a sense in which we cannot abstract from the divine-human relationship simply because it is inescapable. It manifests itself negatively in the distrust which characterizes henotheism and polytheism. What is at issue in the quotation, however, is the sort of abstraction which is appropriate to metaphysics. Niebuhr denies the metaphysician, qua metaphysician, access to the deity value of God.<sup>133</sup> This does not preclude metaphysical inquiry into the principle of being as it relates to nature and natural powers, though even in this case the particular faith standpoint of the inquirer will exert an indirect influence.<sup>134</sup> Niebuhr speaks of abstraction within the theological enterprise itself,<sup>135</sup> and some of his own work exhibits metaphysical tendencies.<sup>136</sup> But nothing in Niebuhr's

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<sup>132</sup>Frei, p. 75.

<sup>133</sup>Supra, pp. 78-80.

<sup>134</sup>Cf. RM, pp. 114-15; RS, p. 45. <sup>135</sup>PC, pp. 129-30.

<sup>136</sup>RM, pp. 31-34, 100-113.



writing qualifies the unavailability of some faith triad and the inaccessibility of God as he is in himself. While this may be a deficiency in Niebuhr's method, our present concern is whether it undermines talk about God's freedom.

Niebuhr's emphasis on the divine initiative in the gift of faith would seem to justify such talk. The transforming power which initiates universal responsibility is clearly not at man's disposal. The rich variety of the natural world and the continuing surprises of human experience would allow us to speak of the living God quite apart from any abstract metaphysical forays into the divine essence. However, Niebuhr makes no attempt to suggest the nature of the connection between these phenomena and the principle of being. Frei is correct in pointing to the lack of metaphysical inquiry as a weakness in Niebuhr's theology at this point. We shall return to this matter as well as the problem of divine action below.<sup>137</sup>

There is another variation on the anthropomorphism theme which we must attend to. Niebuhr's relational method may force him to begin from a "subjective point of view" which can never reach the proper beginning for theology, the free and sovereign grace of God.<sup>138</sup> All that can be said in reply to such criticism is that the subjective point of view is part of what is entailed in being a finite terminal individual. One's particularity is inescapable; there is no where else to stand. Given this situation, Niebuhr's

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<sup>137</sup> Infra, pp. 246-59.

<sup>138</sup> Frei, p. 75.

critical method seeks to guard against subjectivism. The reciprocity among self, social companions, and reality is a constant correction in matters of commitment as well as matters of observation. If the subjective point of view is abandoned in the revelatory situation, to whom is God disclosing himself?

A criticism similar to those we have been discussing is that Niebuhr, despite his protestations to the contrary, defines God in terms of human values. Sidney Knight expresses this criticism in his claim that Niebuhr's theology presupposes the human attachment to life and thus values God as a means to worthwhile existence.

The problem is that although Niebuhr sees that the eternal must be sought for its own sake this position is incompatible with the starting place he has chosen. The question of eternity is raised by Niebuhr in the first place on the basis of an analysis of man and his needs. The acknowledgment that the eternal cannot be sought for the sake of the temporal ought to include the recognition that neither can it be approached originally from the standpoint of satisfying human needs. What Niebuhr has done is to demonstrate the breakdown of his own procedure. He has called for a preoccupation with God for his own sake, but nowhere has his own procedure reflected such a beginning point. On the contrary, he has said, as we have seen, that the religious question is which reality can fulfill the human need for God. And he has defined God as the object upon which we rely to give meaning to human existence. . . . In showing the interestedness of theology he does not preserve the distinction between interest and self-interest. 139

What is Niebuhr's starting point? It is the God-man relationship and as such it can be understood as a beginning

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139 Alfred Sidney Knight, Jr., "Responsibility and Obligation in the Ethics of H. Richard Niebuhr and Karl Barth" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1966), p. 97.

in polarity. The subject matter of theology is God-before-man and man-before-God.<sup>140</sup> On the one hand Niebuhr begins with God's self-disclosure in revelation. Here man recognizes that he is valued by One beyond the many, that his finite existence is meaningful. This religious knowledge, this gift of faith received in positive encounter with God, cannot be isolated from all value considerations. Niebuhr rightfully criticizes those who would so isolate revelation.

They make revelation their starting point, but by dealing with it as though it were a bolt out of the blue and by refusing to relate it to the value cognitions of men, they fail to give an understanding of the process whereby revelation is received. They insist upon the uniqueness of revelation, particularly upon the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, but by setting the unique revelation completely apart from other faiths, they fail to show the relation of various faiths to each other and to describe intelligibly how one faith supplants another.<sup>141</sup>

This brings us to man's faith that life is worth living which Knight apparently takes as Niebuhr's only starting point. In fact it is the subjective side of the God-man polarity which is the subject matter of theology. The religious need which results in a search for the reality which merits the attachment of faith in life's meaning is a manifestation of man's inescapable relation to God. The heart is restless because man's relation to God in being precludes satisfaction in an ultimate faith attachment short of God. In this context self-interest, that is the interest

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<sup>140</sup> Niebuhr, "The Position of Theology Today," pp. 9-11.

<sup>141</sup> Niebuhr, Nature of Religious Experience, eds. Bixler et al., p. 111.



of a self related to God despite its own ignorance or denial of that relation, leads man to despair at the passage of the gods. For Niebuhr this process witnesses to the sovereignty of God, the real foundation of his theology. Knight's argument has force only if we lose sight of this foundation.

If the problem of self-interest is discussed at another level, that is in abstraction from its actual basis in the God-man relation, then it is a modified henotheism in which the self is substituted for society-as value-center and cause.<sup>142</sup> If this is what Knight means by self-interest then Niebuhr not only preserves the distinction between interest and self-interest, he puts it at the heart of revelation. In revelation self-interest gives way to God-interest. When and not until this happens can the radical reconstruction of all our supposedly absolute value systems begin. In this sense the self is often the last god to fall before revelation's transforming power.

In concluding our discussion of Niebuhr's alleged anthropomorphism we must ask if faith itself is not the subject of his theology. Niebuhr certainly does pay a great deal of attention to faith as trust in and loyalty to a center of value and a cause. It is also true that his definition of God is often couched in these terms.<sup>143</sup> Yet Niebuhr's analyses of faith are analyses of beings in relation. As the self - social companion - cause triad makes clear, faith characterizes a particular kind of context or situation

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<sup>142</sup> See RM, pp. 28-29.

<sup>143</sup> Supra, pp. 76-77.

in which the social self always stands. Faith has its basis in relational being which is not restricted to religious communities. The sort of analysis Niebuhr undertakes in Radical Monotheism and Western Culture is a service to theology because it reveals the universality of faith, the pervasiveness of its structures, and the variety of its objects of attachment. It supports the claim that revelation is not a "bolt out of the blue." It is rather the self-disclosure of One with whom man is already in relation even though that relation be marked by ignorance, perversity, and conflict.

Niebuhr's objective relativism seeks to do justice to the objectivity of beings that are known only in relation. As I have tried to show, his method can be defended against the charges of dualism and anthropomorphism. Because Niebuhr so often approaches his subject matter through polar analysis, his work may give the impression of vacillation. Niebuhr compares the historical movement of theology to the balanced physical movement of a bicycle rider whose progress is marked by "an almost infinite number of variations of the wheel to right and left and by a constant balancing of his body through small inconspicuous shiftings of weight."<sup>144</sup> Borrowing this metaphor, I think it is fair to say that Niebuhr's own theology does not lose its balance and fall into either of the extremes we have considered.

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<sup>144</sup> Niebuhr, "The Position of Theology Today," p. 6.

A final word must be said about the positive basis of objective relativism in the God-man relationship. It is this relationship in being and value that provides the final denial of dualism and anthropomorphism. The matter can be put briefly in terms of revelation. The existential encounter with God or the primitive acknowledgment that being is good, which is to say revelation as transforming power, might evidence a dualism were not creation rather than sin the fundamental presupposition of redemption. The radical reconstruction of our natural knowledge of God which is made relevant in revelation as organizing principle might appear to be disguised anthropomorphism were not the kingdom of God an emergent reality in the present. The God-man relationship is the starting point, the basis in reality, for Niebuhr's theology with its objective relativism, in method and its conversionist thrust. This fundamental observation is well expressed in Frei's description of Niebuhr's theology as one "for which the creative logos is the very Redeemer who converts to himself and to the Creator who is at one with him, in infinity and time, the straying historical creatures who despite their tragic errors and contrary wills still portray the good toward which he has made them."<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Frei, p. 94.



#### D. Jesus Christ and Symbolic Form

The inescapability of the God-man relation and the significance of divine immanence as well as transcendence have been in the forefront of our discussion of Niebuhr's objective relativism. The transformation or conversionist motif in Niebuhr's thought rests on a duality in union rather than a strict dualism, a situation in which God and man are related, but not at the expense of their own identities. It is this single two-world reality, this relation between man and his ultimate environment, which Jesus Christ illumines and transforms.

Given this context of revelation, is Jesus Christ simply the illustration of timeless truths? Such a question has general relevance because of the abstraction and conceptualization of the theological enterprise as such. It is especially appropriate to ask it of a theological system in which revelation illumines and transforms an already existing situation.

Niebuhr himself is aware of this issue.

Revelation, it appears, must either mean the general ideas through which we understand our present human world in its relations, its actions and sufferings, but then it cannot mean the historic occasion in our memory save as an illustration; or revelation means the historic occasion and then it cannot explain present experience save in analogical or parabolic fashion.<sup>146</sup>

In The Meaning of Revelation Niebuhr contends that this dilemma is somewhat false, that what we really seek in studying our history is not so much uniformities of behavior as

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<sup>146</sup> MR, p. 127.

"a principle of unity in a duration."<sup>147</sup> We are not concerned with repetition but with the growth of our present out of the past and into the future. Thus Niebuhr concludes that while concepts and doctrines derived from the historical revelatory event are important, they are less illuminating than the event itself. "What is revealed is not so much the mode of divine behavior as the divine self."<sup>148</sup>

It is clearly Niebuhr's intention to avoid viewing Jesus Christ simply as the exemplar of universal laws or divine habits, but we must ask if themes in his own work finally betray this intention. Jesus Christ is the incarnation of the radical faith which identifies the principle of being and the principle of value. Jesus Christ exhibits the double movement between men and God which characterizes the universal triad of faith and appears as universal responsibility in the moral realm. Furthermore, Niebuhr is unwilling to deny the possibility that radical faith and universal responsibility are manifest among men apart from God's revelation in Jesus Christ. In what sense then is Jesus Christ any more than a noteworthy illustration or exemplar, a very special instance of the God-man relationship?

In the first place Jesus Christ himself, this particular being, is an essential factor in the communication of whatever "truths" are in question. This is a confessional statement in Niebuhr's theology. It claims that for the

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., p. 130.

Christian the true character of the God-man relationship is mediated through Jesus Christ. This claim illustrates a general feature of social selfhood, namely that self-knowledge is mediated by representative Thous. In the case of cause triads the "thirds" exhibit the same personal and self-transcendent qualities as individual social companions. Religious "truths" must be communicated in the context of interpersonal relations of the cause variety if they are to bear on one's own selfhood. In the particular case of Christianity Jesus Christ is an essential party to any such triad.

The importance of personal mediation in the communication of what it means to place one's confidence in the principle of being is apparent in Niebuhr's extended description of Jesus Christ in Christ and Culture.<sup>149</sup> Exemplification and teaching are closely related in the subject of the description, and the description itself communicates much about radical monotheism which is absent from Niebuhr's explicit discussions of the principle of being and the principle of value. This is an example in Niebuhr's own work of the difference between a dramatic pattern and detached ideas. It exemplifies the view that universals are known only in concrete particularity which is also the basis of Niebuhr's employment of synecdochic analogy.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> CC, pp. 11-29.

<sup>150</sup> Supra, pp. 29-30.

If the particular teacher is intimately connected with the communication of truth about the meaning and destiny of one's own existence, how does Niebuhr incorporate this factor into his theological understanding of Jesus Christ as the revelation of God? I have contended throughout this essay that in Niebuhr's view revelation involves the two elements we have discussed as "transforming power" and "organizing principle." It is as organizing principle that Jesus Christ serves to orient the self in its relations of trust and loyalty, to aid the self in understanding these relations as part of a single, intelligible inner history. It is in this capacity that the revelatory event becomes the basis for generalization about the God-man relationship. Having such generalizations in hand, we can then say they are exemplified or illustrated in Jesus Christ. The question we are pressing here is whether Jesus Christ can be understood simply as an organizing principle. On Niebuhr's terms such an understanding would be seriously distorted. Lacking the element of transforming power, such an interpretation of Jesus Christ would not include all that Niebuhr means by revelation.

The organizing principle is ineffective without transforming power. It is an interpretation of reality as seen from the standpoint of a particular self - social companion - cause triad characterized by faith in God. Trust in and loyalty to any other god distorts the vision, thereby precluding a full understanding of the proposed



interpretation and the possibility of responses based upon it. Revelation must involve a transforming power that will bring about a reattachment of faith and thus empower the effective employment of the organizing principle. An intellectual apprehension of the revelatory event is not enough by itself. It must be coupled with an existential apprehension which frees the self from its exclusive, defensive faith attachments and enables it to participate in the universal triad of faith.

The Christian who confesses Jesus Christ as the revelatory event in his own relation to God is not simply saying that in this particular being he sees the pattern for the radical faith or the universally responsible self-hood which he himself seeks to embody, however partially and incompletely. He is also saying that Jesus Christ is somehow instrumental in making his efforts and his small successes possible. There can be no doubt that Niebuhr seeks to maintain this double character of Jesus Christ as perfect illustration and empowerment.<sup>151</sup> The difficulty lies in explicating just how the latter takes place. If we grant that reconciliation involves some kind of existential encounter with God, that still does not tell us what part Jesus Christ plays in such an encounter. We have already noted that this is the point at which Frei finds the tendency to dualism most apparent.

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<sup>151</sup>  
RS, pp. 163-64.

Niebuhr grants the difficulty of saying how it is that Jesus Christ actualizes our reconciliation.<sup>152</sup> Since faith in the One beyond the many is an assurance which reason cannot give itself, perhaps the phenomenon of transforming power can never be fully explicated. However that may be, Niebuhr's work enables us to say a bit more about what it is in Jesus Christ that makes any definition simply in terms of "illustration" or "exemplification" profoundly incomplete.

Jesus Christ is a symbolic form. Unfortunately Niebuhr's explicit discussions of symbolic form or interpretive image are limited.<sup>153</sup> However, what he does say is quite consistent with the rest of his work. The mediating capacity of symbols in the reciprocity between subject and object is in keeping with Niebuhr's epistemology. His own use of interpretive images is apparent as early as 1937 in The Kingdom of God in America. Jesus Christ as the Son of God symbolizes the double movement between God and man long before Niebuhr explicitly identifies him as a symbolic form. Resymbolization and the revitalization of traditional symbols is an important theme as Niebuhr reviews his own theological pilgrimage.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid., p. 176.

<sup>153</sup> See RS; "The Idea of Covenant and American Democracy," Church History, XXIII (1954), pp. 126-35; "Martin Luther and the Renewal of Human Confidence," Address delivered at Valparaiso University, 1959; "Towards New Symbols," Cole Lectures, Vanderbilt University, 1961.

<sup>154</sup> Niebuhr, Christian Century, LXXVII, p. 251.

Though we have already discussed symbolic forms or interpretive images at some length, it is worth recalling several points for our present purpose with respect to Jesus Christ.<sup>155</sup> A symbolic form is not an exact copy of reality. It is an image which facilitates dialogue between man and reality, or better communication among participants in triadic relations.

The world we live in is always an interpreted world. The objects and the persons that surround us never photograph themselves directly on the sensitive film of previously unexposed minds. Every vision, every hearing that we have is something like a work of art in which we impose our interpretive images on what we see and hear and touch and smell and feel. We never deal with brute facts but only with artifacts that are the product of the energies of what is given to us and what we give to it. All seeing and hearing is communication: it is a give and take; and in that communication the symbolic forms of our languages, or our arts, play a determinative role. The argument that I am making is not the argument of an idealism for which the so-called real world is a projection of the spirit - whether of the individual, the group or a world spirit. It is an argument - to speak in philosophical terms - for a critical realism, but of an historic sort which understands our communication with natural objects and with persons about us as a continuing movement in which correction is forever taking place and in which interpretation never ceases.<sup>156</sup>

Symbolic forms do not exhaust reality. When we mistakenly think they do, our dialogue with the real object ceases. When symbol and reality merge our dialogue with other selves is also short-circuited. Niebuhr understands interpretive images as instruments for the discovery of meaning rather than the declaration of conclusions.<sup>157</sup> All

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<sup>155</sup> Supra, pp. 68-71.

<sup>156</sup> Niebuhr, "Towards New Symbols," pp. 5-6.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

this is consistent with Niebuhr's use of the responsibility image, man-the-answerer, as a reflection of reality and the basis of a conceptual theory of responsibility which serves as an instrument of analysis. Symbolic forms facilitate our apprehension of reality and our dialogue with others about that reality.

The continual interaction and mutual modification which characterize the function of symbolic form point up the inadequacy of abstracting "timeless truths" from the revelatory event, Jesus Christ. Such abstraction has its place as a consequence and not an initiator of the dialogue which takes place in the universal triad of faith. In what sense such truths are "timeless" is also debatable since even the symbolic forms are historical.

We have repeatedly drawn attention to the God-man relation as the ongoing situation which Jesus Christ illumines. It is this way of dealing with the revelatory event that suggests Jesus Christ simply illustrates a continuing state of affairs. But if Jesus Christ is a symbolic form, then illumination must involve dialogue, communication, and interaction among selves, social companions, and reality itself. The continuing Lordship of Jesus Christ is based in a reality which maintains and makes powerful a life such as his. The concept "symbolic form" is employed in explicating this contemporaneity of Jesus Christ. Transforming power is not resident in Jesus Christ alone but in him as the symbolic form appropriate to our relation with God.



That relation necessitates the use of symbolic forms because it is a relation of dynamic interaction, a continuing dialogue rather than a conversation ended two thousand years ago. The double movement of man to God and God to man is an interaction which is, for the Christian at least, facilitated by Jesus Christ. He points beyond himself to the ultimate reality with which we must be reconciled, the One to whom we respond in all our responses, and he also reflects that reality, bringing to light the redemptive character of the One who is in as well as beyond the many.

Reality is made known to us through subject-object interaction which makes use of symbolic forms. The most lively interaction is misunderstood or distorted if we attempt to use inappropriate symbols and images. Likewise, if we forget that symbols are merely servants of a real interaction among beings, we attend to the image rather than the reality. This is simply idolatry in another guise. As in all its guises it stunts our growth and distorts our possibilities. Though we sense the powerful reality behind the symbol, we become proficient in the use of the latter without confronting the former. Communication in the universal triad of faith becomes more and more difficult. The same problem arises when we use revelation as an end in itself, when we forget that Jesus Christ in his double character facilitates a real dialogue between God and man that involves the entire realm of being.

The symbolic function of Jesus Christ in our life of interpretation is a subject for our exploration. The recognition of Jesus Christ as interpretive symbol of God and also of man need not lead us into the realms of mythology, but rather, I believe, in the direction of a better grasp in our day of who he is and what he does.<sup>158</sup>

#### E. God

Given the foundation of Niebuhr's theology in the God-man relationship, it is not surprising that much of our critical discussion up to this point has dealt at least indirectly with the One in whom we live and move and have our being. Before concluding our appraisal we must attend to some significant matters which have not yet been given explicit consideration.

##### 1. The one in and beyond the many

One difficulty we face in Niebuhr's understanding of God is the identity between the principle of being and the First Person.<sup>159</sup> In what sense is being itself, the ground of being in which all beings participate, personal? Before we can make a judgment on this issue a brief reconstruction is in order.

The basic assumption, the starting point, is man's inescapable relation to God. In Niebuhr's theology this is a given. But even in this initial given there is a note of

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid., pp. 16-17.

<sup>159</sup> "First Person" as it is used throughout this discussion refers to God as Infinite Thou or eminently personal in the reflective sense appropriate to "thirds" in triadic relationships of the cause variety. See supra, pp. 129-33.

complexity. Man is not simply related to God as he is related to finite creatures. Man's life and movement and being is in God.<sup>160</sup> This is not an incidental matter of phrasing. Niebuhr speaks of God as the "final circum-ambien-<sup>161</sup>cy," the "last environment,"<sup>162</sup> and the "environment/environing all our environments."<sup>163</sup> God is not only the One beyond the many; he is in the many as well. When Niebuhr speaks of God as the ground of being he means the "One beyond all the many" and the "constitution of things."<sup>164</sup>

Niebuhr uses the phrases "principle of being" and "principle of value" to indicate that God is not a being or a value in the primary sense.<sup>165</sup> The element of "beyondness" should not distract us from the element of participation in Niebuhr's explication of our relation to God. Radical monotheism refers to "no one reality among the many but to One beyond all the many, whence all the many derive their being, and by participation in which they exist."<sup>166</sup> The transcendent Being is also the immanent Being.

The distinction I am emphasizing here is incorporated into other themes in Niebuhr's work. In dealing with God as a cause, Niebuhr notes a duality consisting of the principle

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<sup>160</sup> Cf. RS, pp. 44, 88.

<sup>161</sup> RS, p. 153.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., p. 155.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., p. 175.

<sup>164</sup> Niebuhr, Christian Century, LXXVII, p. 248.

<sup>165</sup> RM, p. 33, n. 7.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

of being itself and the realm of being. In each case, loyalty to one entails loyalty to the other.<sup>167</sup> The movement through self-transcending thirds which characterizes cause triads is "a movement of self-judgment and self-guidance which cannot come to rest until it makes its reference to a universal other and a universal community, which that other both represents and makes his cause."<sup>168</sup> All that we said about Niebuhr's two-worldliness is also relevant here.<sup>169</sup>

An account of the connection between God as principle of being and God as First Person can be given in terms of the self - social companion - cause triad. When the principle of being is the third in such a triad it is reflective and representative. Commitment to this principle as a cause brings evaluation and judgment upon the self in all of its relations. Such a commitment also provides a focus or point of orientation for the self, not because the principle of being refers beyond itself but because it represents the universal community. I am not arguing here for the personhood of God on the basis of a structural analysis of interpersonal relations. I am merely pointing out that the abstract features which characterize thirds in cause triads and thus distinguish those thirds as personal also apply to the principle of being when it is the object of trust and loyalty.

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>168</sup> RS, p. 87.

<sup>169</sup> Supra, pp. 219-22.



This line of discussion on the basis of cause triads suggests a further point with respect to the distinction between God as transcendent, beyond the many, and God as immanent, in the many. We recall that self-evaluation and self-judgment are not mediated by a generalized other.<sup>170</sup> Thus it would seem that God as representative of universal community is in some sense distinct from that community. If we know God as our Author, Judge, and Savior, then he must confront us in some way as distinguishable from the realm he creates, orders, and redeems. If this is the case, then the distinction between God as transcendent and God as immanent may have some bearing on the self's understanding of the principle of being as personal.

It is God as transcendent Other which the self meets in the revelatory event. We have already discussed the existential confrontation which takes place in revelation as the present reconciliation between myself and the Determiner of my Destiny. When God discloses himself as person in Jesus Christ, when men receive the gift of faith, there is an I-Thou encounter between the self and the Infinite Thou, the transcendent God. Here the One is clearly beyond the many insofar as his own identity is concerned, even though we recognize him as the One active in and through the many. He is distinguishable from all else to which the self is related. The element of acknowledgment and the

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<sup>170</sup> Supra, pp. 7-10.

"inexpugnably personal" aspect of the self's response further establish the interpretation that Niebuhr understands the God of revelation as the One beyond the many, a transcendent reality with its own objectivity.

What we try to point to with the aid of conceptual terms as principle of being or as the One beyond the many is acknowledged by selves as "Thou." The integrity that is before them here is the oneness of a self; it is the faithfulness that keeps promises, is indefectibly loyal, is truthful in freedom. God is steadfast self, keeping his word, "faithful in all his doings and just in all his ways." This principle of personlike integrity is fundamental in a revelation that is an event which elicits the confidence of selves in their ultimate environment and calls upon them as free selves to decide for the universal cause. <sup>171</sup>

It is also consistent with Niebuhr's position to say that our confrontation with God as immanent is personal only in an indirect and far less existential sense. The One beyond the many encountered as Thou in the revelatory moment meets us in all the actions upon us. But what we meet there is an expression of the unity we meet in revelation. Thus it is that God is present but hidden in every situation. We are negatively aware of this presence when our exclusive faiths are divisive and destructive. We are positively aware of this presence when the transforming power of revelation enables us to employ the symbolic form of Jesus Christ as an organizing principle.

The God to whom Jesus points is not the commander who gives laws but the doer of small and of mighty deeds, the creator of sparrows and clother of lilies, the ultimate giver of blindness and of sight, the ruler whose rule is hidden in the manifold activities of plural agencies but is yet in a way visible to those

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<sup>171</sup> RM, pp. 46-47.

who know how to interpret the signs of the times.<sup>172</sup>

The priority of transforming power in revelation is paralleled in the fundamental and immediate character of an I-Thou relation which identifies the objective reality found in all the self's relations. Again we must warn against exalting this priority to the point where it separates rather than distinguishes two elements or features of a single event or reality. The radical reconstruction of our natural knowledge of God cannot be sustained unless we continually return to that personal confrontation which initiated the transformation. The hope for future existential encounters with the One beyond the many is also part of our response to the many.

With respect to our original question, I have tried to show that Niebuhr's analysis of interpersonal relations and his understanding of revelation offer sufficient grounds for saying that the One beyond the many, the principle of being, is personal. However, it is apparent that the One beyond the many is itself only part of Niebuhr's concept of God. The God we actually respond to in our day-to-day existence is the One in the many, the living God active in the complex relational interaction which characterizes our existence as selves. The personal confrontation with the transcendent Other poses a problem of interpretation for the self because that willing, knowing, judging Other is immanent in the world. The kingdom of God is not some

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<sup>172</sup>RS, p. 67.

distant ideal; it is an emerging reality in the present. That Niebuhr does not shy away from the implications of this immanence is apparent in his interpretation of war. His understanding of Jesus Christ as symbolic form is another indication of the seriousness with which Niebuhr takes the reciprocity of the God-man relation. In universal responsibility the self who responds to God's action is accountable in his anticipation of God's reaction to that response. So too in Niebuhr's analysis of the forms of faith, conflict is evident among real beings in the world. All of these themes in Niebuhr's work assume an active God-man relationship of mutual reciprocity. But how, if at all, does this activity bear on the transcendent God, the Other who meets us as First Person in revelation? How are divine transcendence and immanence related?

What I am suggesting here is that the real problem in Niebuhr's understanding of God is not the identity of the principle of being and the First Person, but rather the lack of identity between the principle of being as personal and the living God active with man in the world. This lack of identity is certainly not intended. Indeed, Niebuhr's theology as a whole is an affirmation that the One who meets us as person in revelation is the One who is actively present in all our relations. "He met us not as the one beyond the many but as the one who acts in and through all things, not as the unconditioned but as the conditioner."<sup>173</sup> The

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<sup>173</sup>MR, p. 183.



transformation motif rests on this identity. Yet there is nothing in Niebuhr's work which explicates the identity in God himself. It is this weakness that precipitates Frei's charge that Niebuhr vacillates between a dualism and anthropomorphism. The dualism is by default. Frei is correct in suggesting that Niebuhr has failed to exhaust the possibilities of metaphysics for the theological explication of Christian faith in a living God.<sup>174</sup> It is possible that Niebuhr's fundamental intuitions with respect to relational selfhood and the triadic structure of interpersonal relations could be pursued in a metaphysical analysis which would suggest more clearly the sense in which God is at once transcendent and immanent. This would overcome the apparent dualism and counter anthropomorphic misinterpretations.

Niebuhr's failure to undertake such an analysis or point to possible resources for such a program results not only in the weakness we have been discussing, but also in an explicit inconsistency which tends to qualify his strong emphasis on the active character of the God-man relationship. It is clear that Niebuhr does not have a static view of God. In defending his ethics of response against the charge that it is simply resignation to the will of God, Niebuhr speaks of the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ as "the loving dynamic One, who does new things," and whose relation to

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<sup>174</sup> Frei, pp. 71-72.

the world is "more like that of father to his children than like that of the maker to his manufactures."<sup>175</sup> And yet all the receptivity and responsiveness seems to be on man's side of the relationship. "Though God's relation to man is not qualified by man's acceptance or rejection of his presence, man's relation to God is evidently so qualified."<sup>176</sup> No-where, to my knowledge, does Niebuhr grant that God himself is in any sense conditioned. He is the unconditioned and the conditioner.<sup>177</sup> This, by itself, seriously jeopardizes the I-Thou relation so important in Niebuhr's understanding of revelation. In such a relation both parties are known and are never again quite the same. If this relation and the universal responsibility it empowers are more than poetic expressions, then Niebuhr's theology must make explicit some sense in which God himself is conditioned. "The independence of God from experience does not imply his remoteness from experience."<sup>178</sup> We can agree with this denial unless God's independence is absolute in every respect. As it stands, the failure to qualify God's absoluteness in any sense whatever tends to undermine the basis of Niebuhr's entire position, the God-man relationship. A fuller explication of how the One beyond the many is in the many could relieve Niebuhr's theology of this distracting inconsistency.

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<sup>175</sup> RS, p. 173.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>177</sup> See CC, p. 28; MR, p. 183.

<sup>178</sup> Niebuhr, Religious Realism, ed. Macintosh, p. 178.

## 2. God's action

A problem directly associated with the issue of God's absoluteness and relatedness is that of divine action in the world. Niebuhr has been criticized for reducing the mighty acts of God to the "inward incitement of a religious response to an ordinary event within the space-time continuum."<sup>179</sup>

Niebuhr writes the following with respect to inward religious responses:

This appears to be the real issue in the present discussion [war as the judgment of God] : subjectivism versus objectivism in religion. For me, as for all nominalists, the inner world is suspect and God must be objective before he can be subjective. . . . As objectivists, we must begin with the initial assumption that there is no event in which divine reason and will are not involved, which must not be understood with the aid of the grand Christian postulate, no matter how difficult the inquiry, and in which we are not required to respond to the universal, no matter how revolutionary for thought and action that demand may be. As subjectivists, we shall look for God's action within, and will judge the world with him rather than be placed under the judgment of objective reality.<sup>180</sup>

All that we have said about deity value and objective relativism is a further denial that God's presence is apprehended through special religious feeling.

It is certainly true that God's action in all the action upon us is a matter of interpretation, but it is not merely a matter of interpretation. The Christian must respond on the basis of his interpretation, and his response is always open to public inspection by believers and

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<sup>179</sup> King, p. 123. King refers to Langdon B. Gilkey, "Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language," Journal of Religion, XLI (1961), p. 201, for this quotation.

<sup>180</sup> Niebuhr, Christian Century, LIX, p. 954.

nonbelievers alike. The interaction between God and man in the world provides objective evidence for or against the fittingness of human responses. Such evidence should not be ignored simply because it is often inconclusive. When God is understood to be active on behalf of some particular group or exclusive cause and human energies are directed by such an understanding, the destructive consequences are not visible to Christians alone.

Given the importance of the self's interpretation in recognizing God's activity, can we still affirm that "our knowledge of God is based not on our discovery of him but on God's revelation of himself in historical events?"<sup>181</sup> Niebuhr's understanding of revelation and divine action calls for a twofold answer to this question. The faith which empowers the fitting response to God's action in all our relations is a gift of God's self-disclosure in revelation. Until the One beyond the many identifies himself as good we cannot properly recognize his activity in the world. Thus the priority of the transforming element in revelation. However, once God has revealed himself we are not only able but impelled to seek him out. Thereafter our knowledge of God increases by discovery and revelation alike.

When the church recognizes the revelatory moment as truly revelatory it is impelled to continuing, progressive interpretation of every occasion in the life of men by means of its great image of the saving work of God. . . . Revelation is a moving thing in so far as its meaning is realized only by being brought to bear upon the interpretation and reconstruction of

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<sup>181</sup> Gilkey, p. 200.



ever new human situations in an enduring movement, a single drama of divine and human action. So the God who revealed himself continues to reveal himself - the one God of all times and places.<sup>182</sup>

In what sense, if any, does Niebuhr's theology justify talk about the mighty acts of God? God is active in all events. His will is what he does in "all that nature and men do."<sup>183</sup> Niebuhr speaks of God as the "structure in things."

God, I believe, is always in history; he is the structure in things, the source of all meaning, the "I am that I am," that which is that it is. He is the rock against which we beat in vain, that which bruises and overwhelms us when we seek to impose our wishes, contrary to his, upon him. That structure of the universe, that creative will, can no more be said to interfere brutally in history than the violated laws of my organism can be said to interfere brutally with my life if they make me pay the cost of my violation. That structure of the universe, that will of God, does bring war and depression upon us when we bring it upon ourselves, for we live in the kind of world which visits our iniquities upon us and our children, no matter how much we pray and desire that it be otherwise.

. . . But this same structure in things which is our enemy is our redeemer.<sup>184</sup>

God is the "doer of small and mighty deeds."<sup>185</sup> Our question then is what would constitute a mighty deed in distinction from any other deed. Niebuhr does not answer this question directly. Perhaps it would help to ask what it is that distinguishes God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ as a special occasion. Niebuhr's answer is confessional. The revelatory event is the particular point in our history, the

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<sup>182</sup> MR, pp. 134-36.

<sup>183</sup> RS, p. 164.

<sup>184</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, "A Communication," Christian Century, XLIX, p. 447.

<sup>185</sup> RS, p. 67.

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history of the individual Christian and the church, in which God discloses himself to us. This does not mean that God was absent or inactive prior to that point or that he is any less present and active now. Revelation is the unveiling of a reality that was present all along, and this unveiling will take place again and again. It seems then that Jesus Christ is a special occasion for us rather than for God. This is borne out in Niebuhr's moral description of Christ.<sup>186</sup> There is nothing in that description to support the view that God himself acted specially or mightily in Jesus Christ. In Niebuhr's understanding of contemporary revelation in Jesus Christ there is the awareness that God meets us, that radical faith is a gift, but again there is no supporting explication of special divine activity. The transforming power in such a conversion is ingredient in the God-man relation and it becomes effective through Jesus Christ.

It is consistent with Niebuhr's theology as a whole to say that God is always acting for the good of his creation. The nature of divine activity at any given moment would therefore seem to depend on the particular state of affairs. The various configurations of human relations would then account for what appears to be special activity on the part of God. In a sense all divine acts would be special because they would all be responses to new situations. We recall,

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CC, pp. -11-29.

however, that Niebuhr does not allow any way in which God is conditioned. So we are finally left without a clear answer to the question of God's special or mighty deeds. God acts in all acts upon us, but there is no indication of how he responds to our action so as to preserve the maximum good in that particular situation. Again it seems that the weakness in Niebuhr's theology is its failure to explicate in metaphysical fashion connections which are apparent or at least suggested at the relational or social-cultural level.



## CHAPTER V

### REVELATION IN CONTEXT

In the first three chapters of this essay I set forth an interpretation of Niebuhr's theological writings. The critical discussion in chapter iv clarified significant features of the systematic interpretation and pointed out the strengths and weaknesses of Niebuhr's theology so understood. In this concluding chapter I will make several summary observations which will also suggest areas for continued dialogue and development on the basis of Niebuhr's thought.

#### A. Context and Movement in Niebuhr's Theology

God is sovereign. All men live and move and have their being in God. The God-man relation defines the situation in which revelation takes place, and it is this relation which revelation illumines and transforms. To deal with revelation in the theology of H. Richard Niebuhr is to deal with revelation in this context. Christianity as a revolutionary movement is sustained by the dynamic interaction between revelation and its context. Neither the

special occasion nor its setting within the structures of human existence can be neglected if revelation is to be understood as God's self-disclosure, the event in our history which is itself intelligible and which makes all other events intelligible.

The significance of the interrelation between revelation and its context is apparent throughout Niebuhr's work, and it is reflected in the first three chapters of this essay. Employing the triadic structure of interpersonal relations and the theory of responsibility as instruments of analysis, we discover a movement within the complex relational interaction which characterizes the human scene. It is apparent in the self-transcending "thirds" of cause triads and in the universal intent evident in the struggle among the forms of faith. It issues in divisiveness and frustration when the self makes its ultimate responses to exclusive causes and their representative Thous.

In terms of the approach taken in chapter i, man's situation raises the problem of meaning. The self attempts to operate with integrity in the midst of its manifold relations. It seeks to establish its own identity within a meaningful context. Given Niebuhr's analysis of selfhood, this is always understood in relation to an other. At all levels of social-cultural interaction the personal impact of a context is mediated through representative Thous. Self-understanding and guidance develop out of dialogue with social companions. Such dialogue involves a "personal"

third, that is to say, an other which is itself reflective and representative. These thirds orient the self and its social companions, focusing the meaning for the particular context in question. If we are speaking of the self's ultimate context, these thirds are the objects of trust and loyalty, objects of faith in relation to which the self has its identity and in response to which it acts with integrity.

The problem of meaning, and with it the problem of self-understanding and guidance, is finally a matter of the gods. These value-centers and causes are the objects of man's ultimate trust and loyalty, the objects to which man attaches his primitive faith that life is worth living. Here the dynamism within the human situation is most clearly in evidence because the discontinuity between meaning contexts and the actual state of affairs is most striking. When the self deals with the problem of meaning at the level of faith and the gods, conflict and destruction cannot be ignored. Indeed, one must ask if self-identity and integrity of action are finally possibilities in any context which includes all elements of human experience. This question seems to be forced upon reflective selves by the very constitution of things.

Niebuhr puts the matter of life's meaning in terms of the One beyond the many. This One represents man's ultimate reality, the final environment in which he lives and moves and has his being. It is before this One that the self must eventually settle the issue of self-identity

and moral integrity. This is the One on whom we are absolutely dependent. The question is whether this One is good, or, put abstractly, whether the principle of being and the principle of value can be identified. The movement in human existence is such that the religious question, the question of life's meaning, is finally asked of the whence and whither of our being here and now. It is in this situation that we are most aware of our own selfhood.

This way of putting the matter is not intended to suggest that we are simply dealing with an intellectual issue to be settled at the reflective level. Certainly reflection is involved, but the movement in human existence which raises the question of life's meaning has a profound existential thrust which results in a malaise of the soul when the self ignores or denies its relation to the final reality in which it lives and moves and has its being. One need not be a philosopher or a theologian to sense what we have called the discontinuity between meaning contexts and the actual state of affairs. When Niebuhr, like Augustine, refers to the restless heart he is speaking for all manner of men whose hunger and thirst is no less painful for lack of articulation.

Apparently there is a deep-running current in human existence which continually disturbs the surface; or perhaps man causes the disturbance in his failure to fathom the depths. This profound force challenges man's efforts to interpret all his relations so as to act responsibly



throughout. There is something in man's experience which leaves him vaguely dissatisfied with all his answers to the question of life's meaning. The vitality of his relational environment is stifled or misdirected. As a result the human situation is the scene of conflict and struggle. This is the situation which revelation enters, the context in which it is to be understood.

Starting with context and moving to revelation as we did in the movement from chapter i to chapter ii, we find that the former limits the latter. Psychological, historical, and religious relativism all place their restrictions on revelation. Divine self-disclosure, no less than human, demands sensitivity and imagination on the part of the recipient. This does not deny the reality of God, nor does it undermine all human knowledge of the divine. It does deny that man can know God apart from his relations. It denies that God in his own self-revelation erases the finite relational selfhood of man. Objective relativism recognizes at once the reality of existents partially perceived and the limitations on knowledge which can never escape a relational perspective. The related phrase which has reference to man's knowledge of God is religious realism. In both cases the reciprocity between subject and object is mediated by interpretive images.

While it is true that revelation is limited by its context, it is also true that revelation illumines and transforms its context. This is the positive side of the

interconnection between revelation and situation. Revelation takes place where we are. The special occasion occurs in our own history, and the participants in this event are not foreign to the human scene. The power of revelation transforms this context, it does not transport man to another realm, imagined or real. The interpretive capacity of revelation organizes this set of circumstances, it does not structure a new set.

The transforming power of revelation is potentially present in the context. Revelation effects a reconciliation between parties to a relationship which has never been inactive. This reconciliation casts a new light on the human situation, revealing dimensions of existence which previously had been hidden or misunderstood. The new perspective involves a new interpretive image which is given in revelation. Revelation supplies the organizing principle for man's self-understanding and guidance in a universal context, a context of meaning in which man responds to the One beyond the many as God.

Once again our attention is directed to the context of revelation. This phase of the interaction between revelation and context is reflected in chapter iii. Now we are in a better position to understand the vitality and tension which we discovered in our initial analysis of the complex relational interaction which characterizes human existence. The movement through self-transcending thirds and the universal intent manifest in the conflict among the forms

of faith witness to a created order which cannot reach fulfillment short of a universal community of faith. The question of life's meaning is finally answered before the universal other, the representative Thou whose cause is the entire realm of being, the One beyond the many in whom all the many participate. Trusting in this One the self is able to reinterpret all its relations so as to act with integrity. A unity of self can only be sustained in response to the unity in and beyond all selves. In reconciliation the self recognizes this unity as gracious. The faith that identifies the principle of being and the principle of value qualifies all the self's relations and empowers universal responsibility.

It was the presence of God which the self had been aware of in restlessness and frustration. Distorted and perverted beyond recognition, the inescapable God-man relationship previously issued in conflict and destruction. Now that same relationship is the source of a creative tension which continually seeks to resolve itself in increased love among God and neighbor. With reconciliation between God and man effected through revelation as transforming power, and with reinterpretation of the human situation effected through revelation as organizing principle, what had been a process making for attrition and despair becomes one issuing in creation and hope.

The movement from sin to salvation is the release from perversion and distortion. The self's ultimate context

of meaning is brought into harmony with the actual state of affairs when the primitive faith in life's worth is attached to God rather than the gods. When God is the object of the self's ultimate trust and loyalty man's fundamental relation is restored to its true character. The dynamism of the human situation is turned to the extension of reconciliation throughout the universal community, the ultimate context of revelation.

#### B. Jesus Christ and Symbolic Form

The organic unity of Niebuhr's theology is rooted in the sovereignty of God, the One in whom man lives and moves and has his being. Revelation as transforming power and organizing principle within this context supplies the movement in Niebuhr's theology. The interaction between situation and special occasion which is reflected in the first three chapters of this essay may also be understood as an interaction between creation and redemption. This presupposes the identity of Creator and Redeemer. The One in whom man lives and moves and has his being is good. The constitution of the universe is redemptive. Here we are at the heart of Niebuhr's theology, the fundamental conviction that God is sovereign, that the One revealed as gracious Father in Jesus Christ is Lord of heaven and earth. It is to this One that man is related in all his relations.

The major themes in Niebuhr's work affirm the continuous and persistent presence of God. The extent of



divine sovereignty is boundless. Yet because God is not simply to be identified with his creation, his presence always results in a dialogical movement of the sort we have witnessed between revelation and its context. Niebuhr's two-worldly thinking, polar analyses, and dualities in union are ways of expressing this movement without falling into a dualism of opposing forces or into a dialectic of thesis and antithesis.

The immanence of God must always be maintained along with the transcendence. Thus God's kingdom is truly at hand. It is an emerging reality rather than a utopian ideal. Likewise the true church of faith is actually present in the churches. Niebuhr's consistent "conversionist" position has its basis in the structures of human existence, in the participation of all beings in the principle of being. Niebuhr's understanding of universal responsibility is founded on the assurance that all human responses to finite action are finally responses to God. That this One is in as well as beyond the many is apparent in both the destruction and the faith exhibited in warfare.

The assertion that radical monotheism dethrones all absolutes short of the principle of being and reverences every relative existent is not simply a bit of rhetoric. It points to the significance of real relations in being, relations which will not yield to the distorted perspectives of exclusive faiths. Such is the God-man relation, and so

objective relativism has its theological counterpart in religious realism.

The real presence of God is such that the human situation is always open to the transforming power and organizing principle of revelation. This is not to say that man is always consciously and voluntarily responsive to God, but that the ingredients of reconciliation and reinterpretation are always present. The transforming power itself is resident in the situation. Revelation does not create faith where there was none; it effects the reattachment of a faith already present. Likewise the interpretive image of revelation is taken from the situation itself. As an organizing principle it does not provide esoteric knowledge of a strange new world; it provides the clue to the intelligibility of this world. The fact that revelation is so related to its context does not belittle the special occasion. It simply manifests the sovereignty of One who is always in as well as beyond the many. Revelation effects transformation and initiates reinterpretation by engaging the present kingdom of God.

The dynamic interaction between revelation and its context is most apparent in the double movement between God and man as that movement is represented and mediated in Jesus Christ. For the Christian the universal triad of faith potentially present in the created order is recognized and partially realized in and through the Son of God. The two essential elements of revelation abstractly defined

have their concrete embodiment in the double character of Jesus Christ as man responding to God and as God empowering such response.

Given the context of the God-man relation as it is understood in Niebuhr's theology, symbolic form is an appropriate concept for the explication of the double character of Jesus Christ. A symbolic form mediates the interaction or reciprocity between subject and object. Its mediation at once mirrors and structures, and its own vitality is dependent upon the context in which it is operating. It does not exhaust the reality it represents and so it is employed in conjunction with other symbolic forms. Its particularity makes it highly suitable for the mediation of interpersonal truth.

All of these features are significant for an understanding of revelation in context. Jesus Christ mediates the double movement between man and God. In his single-minded devotion to God he illustrates the pattern of universal responsibility, representing the true self - social companion - God relationship. At the same time his representation structures that relationship by empowering universal responsibility on the part of his followers and providing the image whereby these followers orient themselves in their relation to God and social companions. Jesus Christ's capacity to so represent and structure the God-man relationship is inseparable from the relationship itself. When Jesus Christ is understood as a symbolic form in this

situation, the contemporaneity of Christ is a manifestation of the redemptive character of creation. Furthermore, Jesus Christ does not exhaust the God-man relationship. Though he may be the preeminent symbolic form for the Christian, he is surely not the only one. When Jesus Christ is mistaken for the reality he represents and when he is understood as man's only interpretive image for that reality, revelation swallows up its context and the special occasion loses its capacity for transformation and reinterpretation. As symbolic form the concrete particularity of Jesus of Nazareth provides the image for parabolic generalization and is itself the occasion for the kind of self-understanding and guidance which can only be mediated by a representative Thou.

Niebuhr's use of symbolic form to explicate the mediating role of Jesus Christ in the God-man relationship is thoroughly consistent with the major features of his theology as interpreted in this essay. Against the background of his epistemology and his understanding of God's redemptive presence throughout creation, and in conjunction with the interrelations he sees among history, faith, and reason, Niebuhr's employment of symbolic form is effective and also extremely suggestive for further theological development. We have already noted that Niebuhr's discussion of symbolic form as such is limited.<sup>1</sup> It is

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<sup>1</sup> Supra, p. 242.



necessary, therefore, to examine the meaning of the concept outside his work in the writings of Ernst Cassirer and others.<sup>2</sup> The findings of an analysis on philosophical and epistemological grounds could then be related in a more systematic fashion to the operation of revelation in context, the activity of Jesus Christ in the God-man relation.

### C. Metaphysics and the Task of Theology

We have seen that the sovereignty of God, and with that the ever-present context of the God-man relation, is the basis of Niebuhr's theology. It is the foundation for all of Niebuhr's major themes, and it provides the systematic unity whereby all of his theological writings have their coherence and consistency. Likewise it provides the basis for overcoming the most pervasive weakness in Niebuhr's theology, the absence of metaphysical inquiry or analysis.

We noted in chapter iv that the lack of metaphysical analysis in Niebuhr's work makes him vulnerable to criticism at a number of points. In some cases, such as his understanding of the self, Niebuhr offers sufficient material to

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<sup>2</sup> Ernst Cassirer's most detailed study of the concept of symbolic form is The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, trans. Ralph Manheim (3 vols.; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953). Two shorter works by the same author which also deal with this matter are An Essay on Man (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), and Language and Myth, trans. Susanne K. Langer (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1946). In addition to Cassirer, Niebuhr mentions Erich Auerbach,

suggest the character of metaphysical findings which would be compatible with his own social-cultural analysis. In other cases, such as his understanding of God, the ambiguity which fills Niebuhr's metaphysical lacunae is more serious. Frei's criticisms regarding dualism and anthropomorphism have their force precisely at those points where a metaphysical analysis would be appropriate. Finally, there are cases where inconsistency or contradiction is the price of avoiding metaphysics. This is most apparent with respect to the issue of God's absolute independence of the creation which is related to him in being and value.

Given the sovereignty of God and the divine presence in all finite action, it would seem that metaphysical inquiry would be a fruitful enterprise. It would be another matter if Niebuhr understood the God-man relation simply as an interpretive device or a workable hypothesis. But it has been the point of much of this essay to show that Niebuhr understands the God-man relation in a far more realistic sense. The kingdom of God is actually at hand, and the constitution of the universe really is redemptive. Metaphysical analysis should be an enterprise of some interest to this kind of theology.

By metaphysics I mean analysis of the general structures of human experience. Such inquiry is certainly not the heart of theology. Nor can it provide assurance

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E. H. J. Gombrich, Stephen Pepper, Philip Wheelwright, and Benjamin Lee Whorf in connection with his own understanding of symbolic form.

that the One beyond the many is trustworthy, a confidence which reason cannot give to man. Recognizing this, there is no more reason to avoid metaphysics as a source of theological insight than there is to avoid activities such as science and politics. Indeed, the abstract character of metaphysical inquiry makes it especially suitable for use as a vehicle for theological explication.

The matter of abstraction raises another issue with respect to the employment of metaphysical analysis in conjunction with Niebuhr's confessional theology. Such a procedure need not make theology apologetic in the defensive sense Niebuhr seeks to avoid.<sup>3</sup> But does it suggest that God can be known apart from his deity value? Certainly if God is sovereign in the strong sense we have asserted he can be known apart from his deity value, though not as God, that is to say, not as the object of the observer's own ultimate trust and loyalty. Niebuhr grants this himself, and in the case of Jesus Christ he calls for a metaphysical analysis to complement his own examination from the point of view of a moralist.<sup>4</sup> A metaphysician can consider the One in and beyond the many even though he himself does not have faith in the God revealed in Jesus Christ. Given the relation between being and value in Niebuhr's thought, it is even conceivable that such a metaphysician would gain some insight into the deity value of this One, though he himself

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<sup>3</sup> See MR, pp. viii-ix.

<sup>4</sup> See supra, pp. 79-80, and CC, p. 14.

might not choose to rest his own confidence there. Be that as it may, there is nothing in Niebuhr's position to preclude the believing theologian from undertaking metaphysical studies himself.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to develop a metaphysical conception of God which would complement Niebuhr's own theological analysis. Furthermore, the theological interest in metaphysics is not simply a matter of finding an appropriate conceptual scheme and adopting it. It is in order, however, to give a brief example of how developments in metaphysics might prove helpful in dealing with difficulties in Niebuhr's theology.

The interpretation of Niebuhr's theology set forth in this essay clearly evidences the necessity to maintain at once God's absoluteness and his relatedness. We have seen that Niebuhr finally undermines the latter in deference to the former.<sup>5</sup> Charles Hartshorne has advanced a conception of God which seeks to allow at once for divine absoluteness and relatedness.<sup>6</sup> According to Hartshorne's dipolar or "panentheistic" view, God is eternal in some aspects of his reality and temporal in others. He is eminently related to the world and in this respect changing. Yet this eminent relatedness, this presence as the One in whom all men live

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<sup>5</sup> Supra, pp. 253-54.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Hartshorne and William L. Reese, Philosophers Speak of God (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1953), pp. 1-25.



and move and have their being, is itself relative to nothing. In this sense God is absolute.

Such an understanding of God raises problems on metaphysical grounds which are far from being resolved. Furthermore, it is debatable whether Niebuhr's position is finally amenable to certain important features of Hartshorne's view, for instance, his doctrine of internal relations. Such matters as these demand detailed study in their own right. My intention here is simply to point out one way in which metaphysical analysis is relevant to problems we have discovered in Niebuhr's theology. We have already discussed at some length an instance in which metaphysical analysis of a quite different sort has provided rich insight in conjunction with Niebuhr's understanding of the self and the revelatory situation.<sup>7</sup>

The metaphysical inquiry I am suggesting is in line with theology's double task of reasoning in faith and criticizing faith, "not as a subjective attitude or activity only but in relation to its objects."<sup>8</sup> Such an inquiry does not preclude the theologian's own participation in the activity of faith. Rather it accepts the challenge of radical monotheism which Niebuhr's own wide-ranging work so clearly demonstrates. For the radical monotheist trusting in the sovereignty of God, the entire realm of being, and with it all human endeavor, is proper subject matter for theology.

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<sup>7</sup> Supra, pp. 177-88.

<sup>8</sup> RM, pp. 14-15.

One may say that the complex object of theological study always has the three aspects of God in relation to man, of men in relation to God, and of men-before-God in relation to each other, while the method of such study consists of intensive participation in the life of the Biblical, historical and contemporary churches in their encounters with God and interactions with the "world."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> PC, p. 125.

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